The Paris Review

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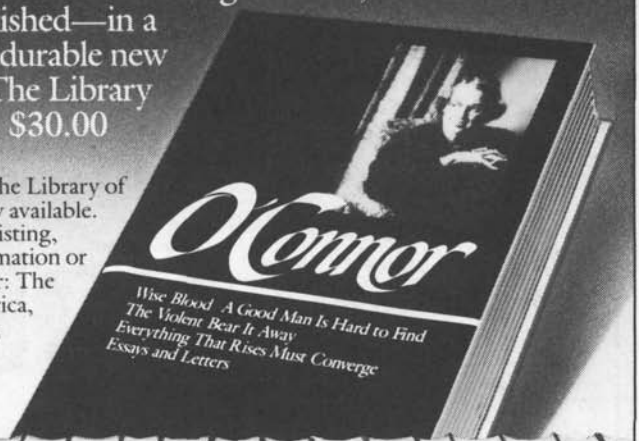
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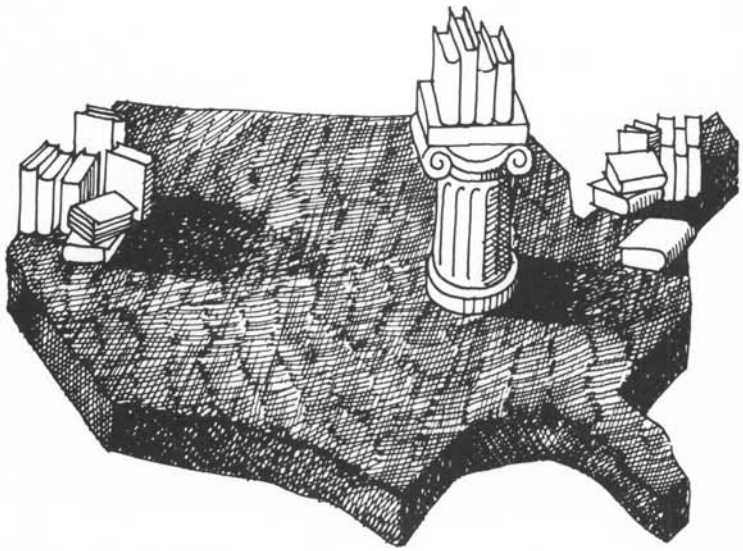

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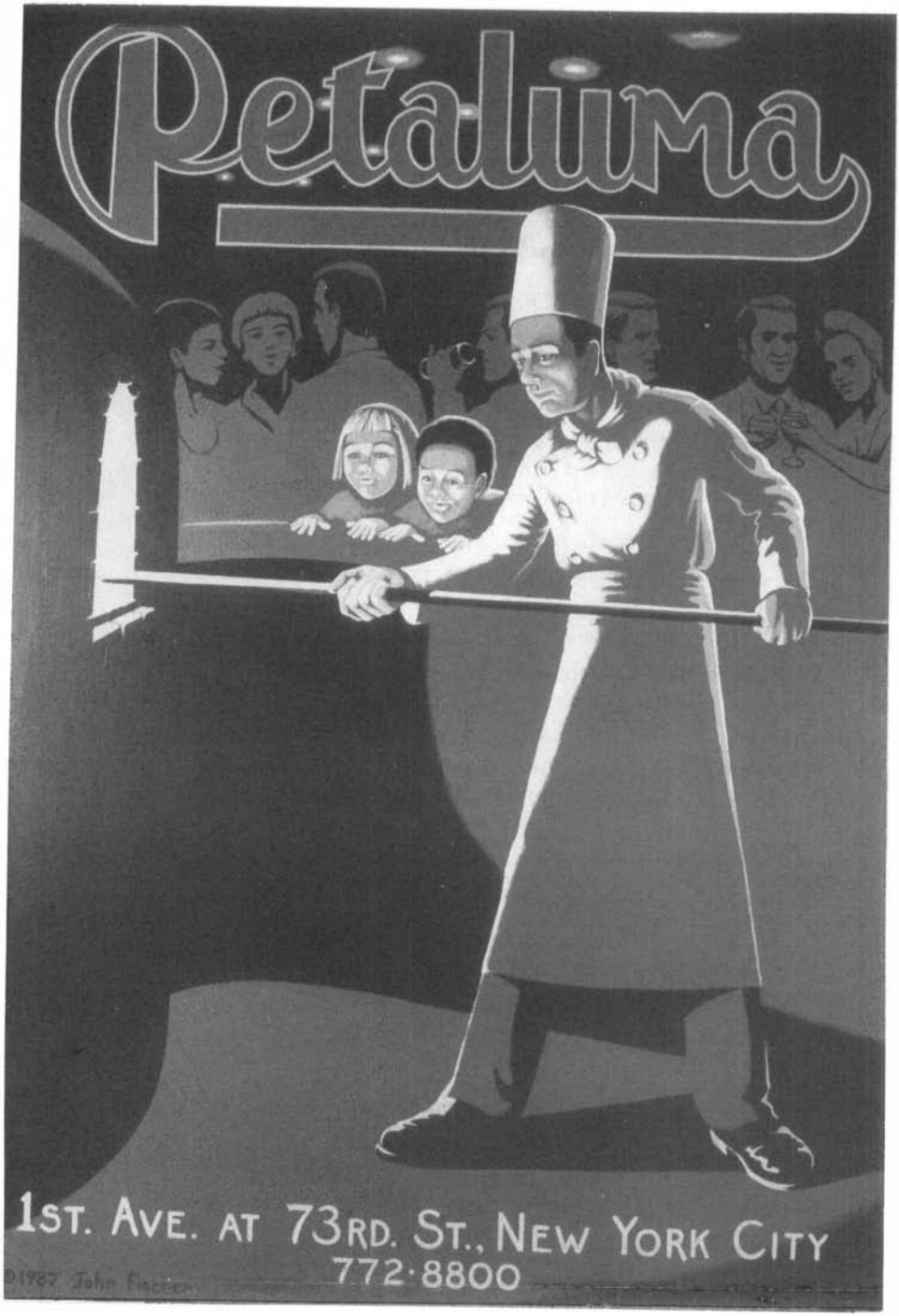

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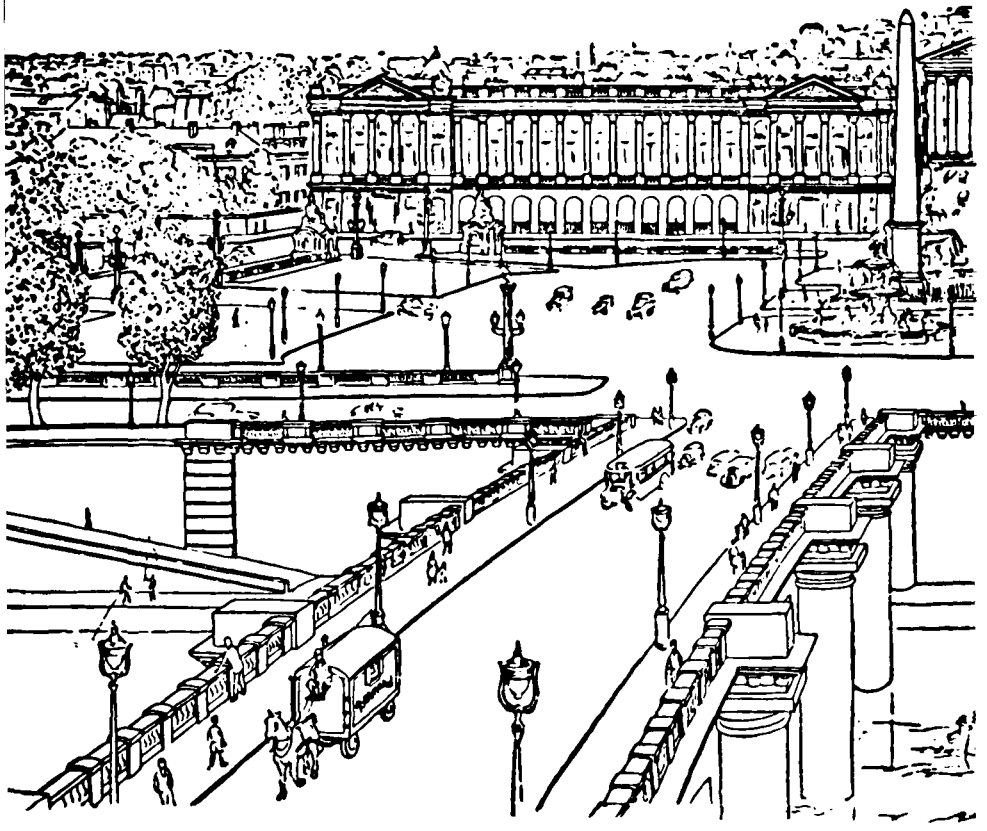

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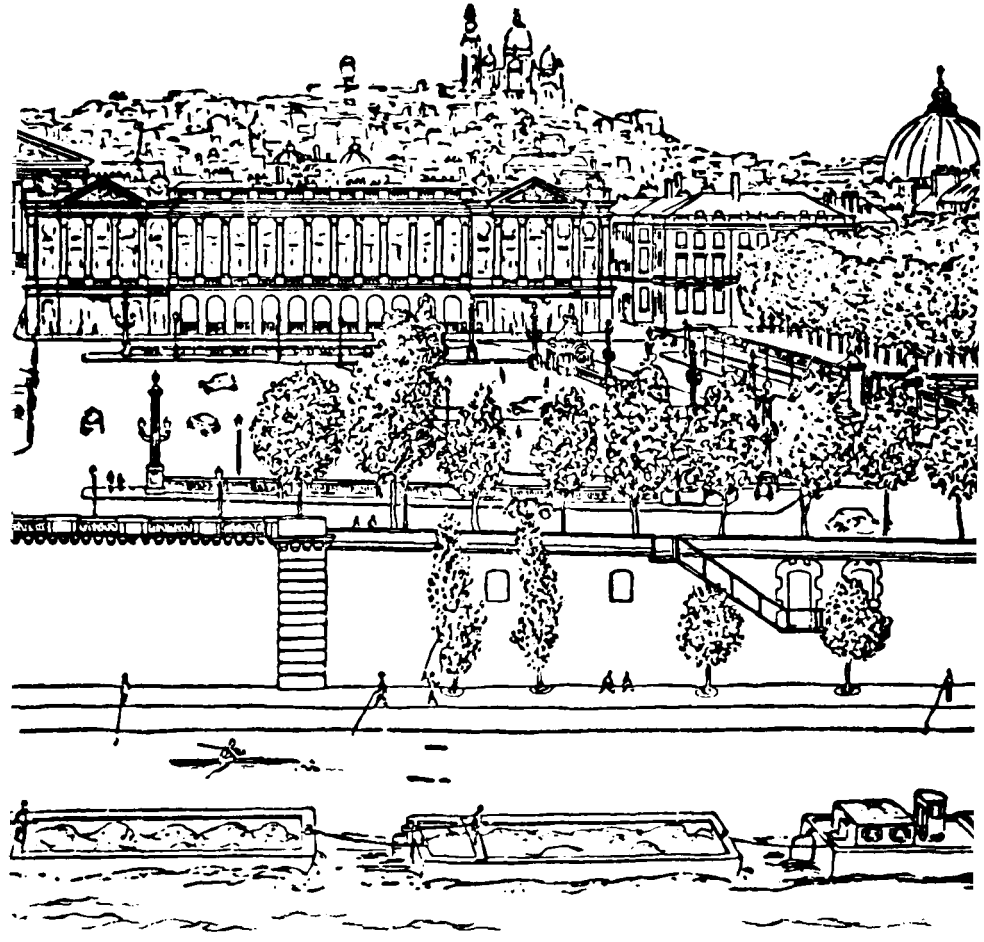

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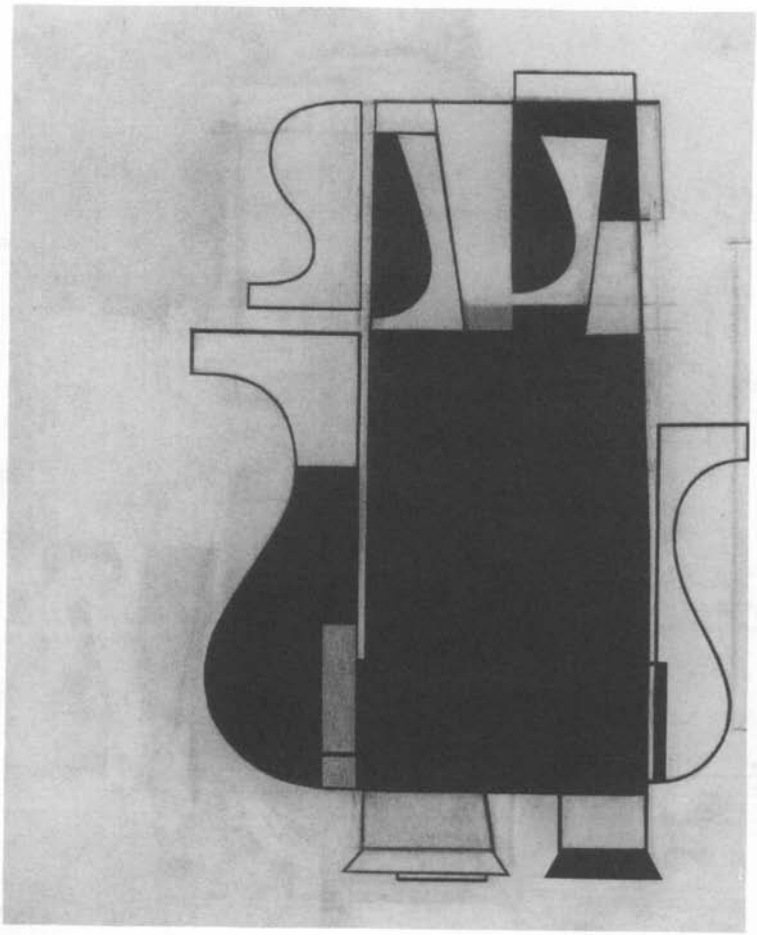

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A Flight of Sparks

Robert Cohen

Victor Franks, because he worked nights, and perhaps because his metabolism, as his ex-wife once suggested, was slower than average, did not function very well in the morning. He was a man who lacked the few simple habits that breed contentment. Thus, when he found himself awake before noon, as he did today, he was not able to walk through the rituals of coffee-making or pet-feeding with his eyes half-closed, the way most of us can, and take a modest comfort in the performance of these small duties. He had loosened his grip on things too far for that. He did not own a coffee-maker, though he intended to get around to buying one soon; and his sheepdog, Milt, had been hit by a crazed Pontiac back in October, the week after Victor's divorce papers came through. He found himself more sentimental about the dog than he would have believed possible. Certainly more than about his wife, or so he took pleasure in thinking. It was rare of late for thinking to afford him anything but pain, so he was not above indulging himself in this particular bit of fancy.

He lay upstairs in the darkened bedroom. His wife had taken the curtains with her and so he had affixed towels over

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the windows. They were heavy cloth, and he had nailed them in hastily, and as a result they admitted only a meager portion of light and fresh air—he could scarcely smell the plum trees in the backyard. One more item he needed to take care of.

A news spot came over the radios. He kept a little Sony in the kitchen, a giant Philco in the living room, and, on the bedtable next to his head, a cheap GE with a digital clock, and they were always on—they supplied the small, sparsely-furnished adobe house with a measure of energy and warmth—even at times, like these, when he'd have preferred to be sleeping. The news warned of refugees, wars of attrition, economic cabals. The world was full of commotion and collision; it seemed to require his full attention. He felt restless; he badly required a cigarette. But he was slow to get up. A nausea had stalled inside him, a washy flotation that afflicts the elderly and the indolent when they find only blank space on that easel in the mind that should hold the sketch of the day's campaign. He put a hand to his swollen stomach and sighed heavily. He was thirty-eight years old. The idea struck Victor with peculiar force, though he had been thirty-eight for several months now and should have long grown used to it. He remembered his father at that age, and shuddered. It was still mid-morning—he shouldn't even have been up for a couple of hours—and it was already feeling to Victor like the dog-end of a bad day.

The phone rang and he remembered why he had set the alarm for ten. "You're late," said Averick.

He had said he would go to the hospital this morning.

"Not that it matters to me, one way or another. Not that I'm keeping track. Late, early. These are shallow, temporal concerns. They're beneath me."

"I'll be there in an hour," Victor said.

"Don't worry about it," breezed Averick. "No hurry. The important thing is your rest. You're a man who needs rest."

"Averick," he said, "lay off. I'll be there in an hour."

"I may not be here in an hour. I may be playing golf. I may be out there on the back nine, whaling away with a five-iron. That's what I'm thinking of doing. I want to be on the tour.

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I want to hear them speak about me in hushed voices on the television. I want to hear that soft, polite applause. Just once in my life—which from the look of things had better be soon."

Phil Averick was Victor's lawyer and friend of many years. They had met as roommates in a three-bedroom apartment in Santa Monica. It was 1970. They had gone through the ordeal of the draft lottery together, celebrated in tandem when some benevolent hand dealt them numbers well in the safety margin. The luck of youth had made them extravagant, generous; it had made them, for a time, good. The third bedroom had been rented by an obscure comedian named Jerry Slott who spent twenty-five days out of every month on the road, playing lounges in Holiday Inns and Ramadas and making the occasional appearance in situation comedies as the skinny kid who whined to the star about his problems. His whine was Slott's special distinction, his selling point—it was lugubrious, subtle, and intimated an acquaintance with hardship older than the hills of Judea. Nonetheless, on those few days he was around he struck both Victor and Averick as an unassuming and genuinely hilarious young man, and they were sorry when, shortly after their graduation from UCLA, he gave up show business to take over his father's shirt factory in New York. The three of them still kept in touch. In fact, when Averick's cancer was diagnosed, the first call came from Jerry Slott; Victor, who'd been camping in Utah by himself, was among the last.

It was a warm day but sunless and without breeze. His car, an old Fiat, needed a tune-up; it was idling roughly and belching an unholy smoke, and when he pulled onto Telegraph the transmission fought him like the Manichean puppet it was. On the station for which Victor served as producer, there was a morning call-in show about lawn maintenance. He flipped to KJAZ and heard the last minute of "Sketches of Spain." It embraced him in its wispy arms and then was gone, replaced by the somnolent patter of the jock.

He hated it, Victor thought. He hated radio; it was really remarkable how much he hated it. Then again, perhaps it wasn't so remarkable. He had been working in it for close to

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twenty years. A generation. At the beginning his work had seemed to him to be an urgent calling, intricate and ambitious, but with the mastery of his years, and the tidal drifts of the era, it had come to seem rather vulgar and simple. It was making him gross, he thought. Or vice versa.

Averick was at Children's Hospital in Oakland, which given his recent behavior was fairly apt. If there is any dignity to be won in a stoic decline, Averick did not seem inclined to pursue it. His illness had incensed him to a kind of rabidity. It had come upon him suddenly and when it hit it was with the force of betrayal, a turnaround of the epic project he had conceived for his life. He was a sharp, big-shouldered man, at home in the wide rooms of the powerful, and he seemed to view the cancer inside him as an awkward and embarrassing product of some capricious internal technician; it aroused in him something very like contempt. If he was going to die, he was going to do it loudly, with fits of rage and pique; he was going to do it *badly*. Victor thought it an admirable stance, and yet he could not, during his sporadic visits, suppress a small distaste. The truth was he felt tyrannized by Averick, and in an oblique way, envious—of his passion, his focused concentration, the air of imminence that loomed above him like the halo of a distant sun.

When he entered the square white room he found Averick propped up by several pillows, dictating a letter into his tape recorder and staring impatiently out the window at the parking lot below.

". . . upon receipt of said document, counsel will file the above motion in appellate court, . . ." his gaze flickered to the door, noted Victor, then returned to the window, ". . . whereupon a decision should be forthcoming within a period of no less than thirty days time. In the unlikely event counsel has not medically expired, his retainer will be calculated at that date. Yours sincerely, etc. . ." He put down the microphone and smiled sullenly at Victor. "No rest for the wicked, eh?"

"It's nice to see you keeping busy."

"Feh. Busy is easy."

"I'm not so sure about that."

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Averick settled in amongst the pillows. "You're never sure about anything, are you?"

Victor considered this. "There are probably worse things," he said, "that you could say about a person."

"I agree," said Averick. "You could say, for instance, a person's got cancer and is going to die. Couldn't you?"

"I suppose you could."

Averick spread his arms triumphantly. He looked thin, but not unhealthy; his cheeks had flares of color in them, and his upper body had not lost its muscle tone. His eyes, though, were sunken and intent, and his brown hair looked dank, limp. "I might not play golf today, after all," he mused. "I don't have the right shoes for it."

"Plus you don't know how."

"There's that, too. But listen to this."

"Okay."

"The doc says I'm in remission. He says I should go home and relax. He says I'm going to outlive his children. Guess what."

"What."

"He doesn't have any children. I checked with the nurse; the guy's a fruit. Also a fucking liar. Still he seems sincere about this remission business. He knows I'll sue his ass right off if he's wrong."

"Phil, that's terrific," said Victor. "So if he says you can go home, why aren't you home?"

"Don't rush me. I'll go soon enough. I've discovered I sort of like it here. People pay attention to me. They look me over carefully. The fellow in the corner bed is a wonderful conversationalist. He knows many things."

Victor glanced over at the corner bed. It was empty. Averick, he thought, was losing his mind.

"Sit down already," grunted Averick. "Let's have some intelligent conversation. *Mano a mano*." He pivoted himself on the bed with his forearms and waited for Victor to finish lighting a cigarette before saying, with some satisfaction, "You look like shit. I mean it. You make me look good in comparison."

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"Well, that's what I'm here for. To cheer you up."

"I didn't say you cheered me up. You don't. Frankly, you're depressing. I'm allowed to say that because I'm in bed here with cancer. I'm allowed to speak freely, to take liberties, to be honest. It's hard not to be malicious. But I'm speaking to you now as your friend of long duration, and I'm telling you frankly that you look like shit, and my professional advice to you is to shave off that ridiculous beard and go off to some tropical clime and relax. Club Med I hear is a wonderful experience. Go down and meet a school teacher, some very serious woman from Cleveland who works with the handicapped, and then fuck her brains out behind the dunes. Failing that, try to dress better. You look like you slept in those mothy clothes. You look, if you'll excuse the expression, very divorced."

"Nice day," said Victor, "if it doesn't rain."

"Fine," said Averick. "Now I'll shut up."

"Good."

"You talk. Tell me something. I don't care what. Just talk about yourself and I'll lie here and nod and forget all about my impending death."

"I have vivid dreams," said Victor.

"Good. Good start. Go on."

"I have vivid dreams of buildings. At night I feel exposed to things and I'm outside the buildings and I can't seem to find the doors. I can't get in. I look in the windows and sometimes I see that the buildings aren't finished. I see the girders and the exposed brick, and I feel like I should do something about it but I can't find my way in."

He blew a jet of smoke and waved it out of Averick's face with his hand. Strangely enough, he was thinking that he enjoyed these talks. They reminded him of that time when he'd just met Averick, when they used to hold court in the living room with guitars and marijuana and cheap wine, hammering out songs, riffing to alien beats, bluffing at grace like fools. Victor had spent his life aiming at a style that would compensate, or complement, what he perceived to be his own lack of

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effectuality. It continued to elude him. There was nothing unique about this; no particular shame in it, either. Still there were times when he bored himself beyond endurance.

"So what?" asked Averick, querulous. "What are you trying to say?"

"Nothing."

"All this shit about buildings. I mean jesus."

"Forget it," said Victor.

"You're not very good at this, are you?"

"I suppose not."

"Do you like me, Vic? I mean, let's be honest with each other. Does the prospect of my dying hurt you? I don't mean the way it hurts me, of course, I just mean, does it hurt. I'm genuinely curious."

"Yes," Victor said slowly. "Yes, it hurts."

"And you'd like to be a good friend, wouldn't you? You'd like to make me better, or at least make me *feel* better, or at the very least make *yourself* feel better, though not in a way that would actually make *me* feel worse. Isn't that right?"

"Isn't what right?"

Averick grinned wearily. "Touché."

"I'm not trying to be clever."

"I know you're not," said Averick. "I'm just having some fun with you. Listen, what I'm trying to get at here is something specific. A favor."

"What?"

"It requires some prefacing, first. Because it's not a little favor. It's not a will-you-please-lend-me-some-money favor, or could-I-borrow-your-lawnmower favor. It is a large, significant favor, the kind one should never ask of anyone, unless of course one happens to be dying of cancer and one happens to be talking to one's oldest friend in the world, cold and forbidding place that it is."

Victor reached over to pluck a tulip from the bouquet on the night-stand that Averick's firm had sent over the week before. It sagged drily as he twirled the stem in his hands. "I think we can dispense with the preface," he said. "What's the favor?"

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"Take a vacation."

Victor laughed heartily.

"Not Club Med. That wasn't serious. I have something else in mind. I want you to take a week's vacation, all expenses to be paid by the party of the second part, i.e. me. I want you to get on a plane and fly down to Mexico, land of contrasts."

"Why?" asked Victor. "What's in Mexico?"

"History, Vic. History everywhere. The Mayans, the Aztecs. Chichen Itza. Ancient Palenque. Constructions of long-dead civilizations are there. Awesome shrines. Timeless cities. Also," he said, and looked, for a moment, flooded with pain, "my daughter."

Victor allowed what was left of the tulip to fall into the trash can below the night-stand. "Your daughter," he said tolerantly, after a while.

Averick had never been married, to Victor's knowledge, though for three years he had lived with a woman named Celia, a homely but delicate neurotic who ran a flower store near the Berkeley campus. They were still friends; she came to visit regularly in the hospital, though she now had a pair of girls to look after at her home in Walnut Creek.

"Your skeptical look is duly noted," commented Averick. "But that's because you don't remember Donna Gans."

"Sure I do. Donna was that skinny painter with the Volkswagen who lived off Melrose. I remember her very well. She always looked wry and unhappy. She wore black sleeveless teeshirts. She liked to humiliate you in restaurants. Who could forget Donna?"

"Evidently neither of us," said Averick.

"Plus, you talk about her all the time."

Averick nodded sadly. "She was the one, Victor. We all have one and Donna was mine. I shipwrecked my innocence on Donna's outer banks. She was my eastern front, my Vietnam, my—"

"I get the point. What does any of this have to do with a daughter in Mexico?"

"Six weeks after we broke up she was in Mexico City, shacked up with some diplomat's son and engaged to be married. They

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had a child, a girl, p.d.q. She told me so herself. This was now nine years ago. Victor, the kid, she could be mine. I don't know, it's just a feeling. I think she's mine, Vic. I want to see her once. Just once. It would be the kind of little melodrama one should go out on, if one has to go out."

"According to the doctor, one doesn't necessarily have to go out."

"Sure." Averick nodded, as though deep in thought, but Victor could see he wasn't listening. "It would be a great service, Vic. It would be, as our people would say, a *mitzvah.* Whattayasay?"

After a moment, Victor said, "No."

There seemed to be something wrong with the inflection of his voice, because Averick was nodding happily, his gaunt face like a buoy.

"No," he said again. "And stop grinning at me. I've got troubles of my own. The last thing I need is to perform your morbid errands."

"Absolutely," Averick agreed, "the last thing."

At that moment the nurse came in, wheeling a big red-faced Irishman towards the corner bed. Victor was able to see his pale spine through the narrow space where his smock tied up in back. "Hello Mr. Murphy," boomed Averick. "How's the pool today?"

"Hush," said the nurse. "Mr. Murphy is very tired." She settled Murphy onto the bed, checked his chart, adjusted the drapes slightly, and then came over to Averick, looking him over with an officious petulance. "And how are we feeling this morning?"

Averick grinned and fluttered his lids. "Like we're on a great adventure, nurse," he said. "Like we're out in the wilds, rugged men on a hunt for big game. Just ask my friend here." He indicated Victor with his long hand. "Tell her, Vic. Tell her who she's dealing with."

Victor got to his feet. There was a tightening in his chest; he felt short of breath. He had to fight the impulse to put his hands in his pockets. Instead he turned them palm up, in supplication, and said to the nurse, "We were twenty years old

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when they landed on the moon. It gave us tremendous expectations."

She smiled at him blankly until he had left the room.

It was obviously a symptom of some illness of his own, thought Victor, watching the continent sprawl around the shadow of the plane. It was a portent of an inner calamity already so well-advanced as to subvert his will entirely. There was no other explanation. Among the bonds that united him to Averick, a quest such as this had no precedent; it was a transmutation of loyalty into recklessness, sense into nonsense. He brooded over it as the plane hurtled southeast. After a while he found, in the bottom of his third glass of scotch, an idea that seemed useful: Averick was doing *him* a favor. He had been sent to Mexico as an act of mercy, an opportunity to escape his friend's decline without dishonor. He had been set free. The notion had a grandness to it, a perfection. Along with the scotch, it warmed Victor's belly. He closed his eyes. There were murmurs inside his ears, whispers of sweet things. He was on his way. Averick had sent him on his way.

Donna Gans, at last report—the news was at least three years old—had moved to the Yucatan, where she was managing a small tourist hotel in Merida. Whether or not she was still with the diplomat's son, Averick had been unable to ascertain; his sources, when it came to Donna, had never been very reliable. Just so, thought Victor. It's the absence that captures us, not the presence. Perhaps that explained his continuing fascination with his own actions, his own swings of passivity and impulse—the absence at their center. He fingered the slip of paper containing the hotel's address and waited for his luggage to be unloaded from the hold.

It was January but the air was hot and flooded with sun. The light glancing off the plane's wing nearly blinded him; he had to squint to see the horizon. Low jungle stretched around the narrow concrete of the runways, studded by short palms with off-white flowers, and laced by thin vines, and the sight of it all—the aridity and stillness, the flatness, the dwarfish scale of fertility under the raging sun—made Victor intensely aware

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of his own size and pallor, and that of his culture. Mexico seemed to him wide but not deep; it seemed to harbor no menacing shadows. He found a cab and handed the driver, who was a full head shorter than he, the slip of paper on which Averick had written the Hotel del Prado's address, and fell into the stiff cracked vinyl of the tiny car's back seat.

In time they were driving through town and coming up on the *zocalo*, which was bright and lushly landscaped. The streets were improbably narrow, the sidewalks nearly nonexistent; although there was little traffic, Victor had an impression of urban stasis he associated with New York and Chicago. But the scale was off. Everything was built low to the ground; the darkening sky was open above them; only the massive cathedral affronted it. The driver's transistor radio tinkled a pop tune and the back of his head swayed benignly to the melody.

"Hotel del Prado, *senor*."

The fare, as he understood it, came to several thousand pesos. He fumbled in his pocket for the unfamiliar bills, and as he did he reminded himself that the exchange rate made this a very small sum indeed, and that, regardless, Averick was footing the bill. He was being carried. Victor turned the phrase over in his head as he reached for his shoulderbag. He would have to get used to it.

The hotel was deceptively elegant. Its facade was indistinguishable from the colorless plaster of the neighboring apartment houses, but inside Victor felt washed in cool breezes. The checkerboard floor tiles led to a reception area at the base of a roofed Spanish garden. Thick vines threaded the stands of bougainvillea and guano palms, which ascended to the upper balconies, the leaves drooping heavily over the iron railings. Victor spent a moment taking it in, breathing of the moist soil. It reminded him of the constructions he saw in his dreams, this interstice of the cultivated and the wild, the solid geometry of the concrete and the profuse disorder of the garden. He had an impression of insect life within it, of rich and abundant cities of ants toiling in a choreography of complex repetitions just below the surface.

"*Senor*?"

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He turned. The girl at the reception desk was dark and precociously solemn, and her features showed a compromise of racial alignments—she did not look purely Mayan, though she wore what seemed to be the standard folk dress, a white smock adorned with a design of red and blue flowers—and Victor could hardly believe his luck at finding her so quickly. She was just the right age, he thought, and he saw something of Averick's irony and fervor in her dark eyes. "*Habla Ingles*?" he asked.

She nodded her head yes, but vaguely. He experienced a flicker of regret, a dissolving.

"Is your mother around?"

The girl inclined her head towards him as though he had only just embarked on what was to be a long and entertaining narrative. Behind the desk, one bare foot came up to scratch at the back of her calf.

"Your mother," Victor repeated, and felt his face crowd with blood. "*Donde*? *Donde* your mother?"

"Mama?" she asked, loudly. "Mama?"

He thought at first she was an idiot, or that perhaps he was. But a thin, tired voice answered hers from a darkened room adjacent to the garden. The girl said something else in Spanish, and then looked at Victor and showed him her high white teeth. He smiled back, and waited.

Then the girl's mother came out. Of course she wasn't Donna Gans, anyone could see that. She was a Mayan, a woman under five feet tall who could not have been nearly so old nor so exhausted as she looked just now, in the fading light of dusk, coming towards him in a blue robe and slippers. Though he had awakened her from her nap she smiled generously at Victor and reached for the hotel registry with no special urgency. "*Buenos dias, senor*," she said wanly.

"*Buenos dias*," he said, wincing at his pronunciation. I am not prepared, he thought. I cannot be of use. "Hello."

"You would like a room?"

"Yes," he said. "A room high up, if you have one. I want to be able to see the town."

"You have your wife with you?"

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"No," he said. "I'm here on business, you see."

She nodded without comment and reached for a key in the recesses of the desk. They discussed the price; considering the opulence of the lobby, he thought it absurdly cheap. The room itself was plain and clean, if somewhat too warm. There was no air conditioner, but she showed him the switch for the ceiling fan and pointed out the bottles of mineral water on the bureau. He asked her about Donna Gans and she told him she didn't know. She had only been at the hotel for seven months—before that, she'd managed a rental car agency in Cancun. She did not know a Senora Gans.

When he'd showered and changed clothes he went down into the town and found a small restaurant off the *zocalo* that wasn't crowded. He drank several beers with his dinner, enjoying his isolation, his anonymity. He watched the antics of the hammock vendors as they accosted the Anglo tourists with their showy nets. One boy came over to his table and dangled his hammocks hopefully, pointing out the quality of the design, but Victor shook his head politely and the boy scooted off after more promising game. He remained in the restaurant until half past ten, by which time it was abundantly clear to Victor that he was drunk. The fact did not surprise him, but it made him slightly resentful—it went against what he'd thought were his intentions. He had come down here hoping to regain some of his control but he saw it would not be that easy a matter.

On the menu, just under the name of the restaurant, was the city's motto, bestowed by King Philip of Spain: "Very Noble and Very Loyal." Victor treated himself to one last beer as he looked it over.

Finally he weaved across the street and into the *zocalo*. A celebration of sorts was unfolding against the backdrop of the Palacio de Gobierno. Flanked by a quartet of musicians, a stylish young woman performed a medley of folk songs. He watched the guitarists for a time out of professional curiosity, but they were hardly professionals. He felt softened, tired. He thought that he had better call Averick.

He went to a phone in the northeast corner of the square

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and fed it with pesos. It took a while to get the international operator. The folksinger departed to vigorous applause; she was succeeded by an older man who launched into a lengthy poetical recitation. His voice afflicted Victor with its pomposity. He leaned into the shell of the phone booth and closed his eyes. When the operator came on he gave her the number of the hospital and then had to wait a good deal longer, and still the poet was reciting, his arms outspread, an evangelical fervor contorting his face into a mask of idiocy. Victor watched with mordant fascination, the phone pressed to his ear, until the night administrator had established beyond doubt that Averick was no longer listed as a patient. Then, rather than undertake the labor of calling him at home, Victor hung up. He'd call the next morning, he decided, and from Averick get counsel on where to go next.

In his room he gave himself over to his fatigue and lay on the soft bed breathing deeply of the dust and the garden below. He did not so much sleep as drift on slow tides towards morning.

The next day he put his call through again and had no better luck: no answer at Averick's house. He was on his own, Victor thought. The idea fixed him with irritation, for a minute; then, abruptly, he felt oddly exhilarated. He was free to pursue his own ends, hunt his own phantom children. A line of poetry floated in his mind. *Dance the orange.* He had no idea what it meant, but it had the feel of a dependable lyric.

He bought some sunglasses in a kiosk on the square and walked through the marketplace. On the crowded sidewalk he felt tall and airy, newly-evolved, a creature of his own imagining. He idled slowly, trying to affect an imperious walk to discourage the attentions of the merchants. He did not want to seem a mark.

It grew uncomfortably warm. The air was close and humid with fruit, the flies swarmed over denuded pork. Some of his heady enthusiasm began to dissipate; he began to feel the crowd on him. After about an hour of drifting through the stalls he came to see that he was lost, and quickened his pace, the sweat trickling over his ribs like the long finger of a seduc-

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tress. It occurred to him that there was not a soul on the planet who knew where he was right now, that his freedom was a terrible dare. Dance *what* orange? He walked faster in pursuit of a way out. When at last he emerged from the thicket of vendors, he headed directly for the nearest travel agency, where he booked a car for that afternoon and collected brochures detailing Yucatecan points of interest.

Back at the Hotel del Prado the woman who had shown him his room was sweeping dead petals from the garden into a pile. She was in the same robe and slippers as the night before, and apparently the same spirits—her eyes took in Victor dispassionately as he nodded at her over his sunglasses. It was not until his foot touched the third stair that he heard her call to him. "*Senor.*"

He turned and leaned over the railing to see her framed in the garden's vines.

"*Senora* Gans. I find out she is not here."

"Yes," said Victor.

"She has gone to the coast, *Senor.* Long time. They think maybe she is on Cozumel. No sure."

He looked at her foggily. She had done him a service and he knew he should be grateful. But he felt awkwardly constrained by the information; it exerted a regressive pull. "Thank you," he said at last, and she ducked back to her broom.

As he took the stairs he was aware of the growth of vines beyond his shoulder, their aspirations of ascent. The climb, the morning's walk, perhaps the food he'd had for breakfast—something induced a disquiet inside him, an unsettling. Too much weight, he thought; I'm carrying too much around. At the top of the stairs he had to pause to collect himself. The door was open in the room next to his and through it he could see the girl straightening the beds. He stood there and watched her for a moment, his hand pressed to his solar plexus, and then went in to gather his things.

For three days he drove in the jungle. He toured the ruin sites by day and passed his evenings in the bars of the archaeo-

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logical motels. He'd sit alone at a table by the window so he could read with his back to the other tourists. The books he read were histories of the Mayans and the Mexicans, full of conquests, and rebirth through adventure, and the infinite corruptions of language and escape. Outside the jungle spread thickly, humming with nocturnal energies. He tried to ignore it, to lose himself in the words, but he couldn't. It would kill him, he thought drunkenly. Averick was out for vengeance, for human sacrifice, retribution. He was lost in the jungle; he had lost his path. There was death out there but it was his. It was his.

The fourth morning he made for the coast.

In Tulum he looked over the ruins half-heartedly and then, when the crowds oppressed him, he walked on the beach. The Caribbean was a welter of greens and blues, of shallows and sudden depths. It lay flat and smooth in the strong afternoon sun. The sand was remarkably clean. He could walk over it easily, it was so cool. He let his sneakers dangle from one hand and gulped great breaths of air. He would try, he decided, one more time to reach Averick. In three days his week would be up, and what would he have to show for it? Other than the books, he had bought no souvenirs, sent no letters or postcards. He had not marked his journey; he doubted very seriously that his journey had marked him. Perhaps, he thought, he should just go home.

But the sight of the water easing in and out of the channel held an offering to him, and he resolved he should spend some time in it. He'd drive up the coast, perhaps do some snorkeling. If he wanted to, he could always catch the ferry to Cozumel.

He noticed then a young man with impossibly blonde hair, regarding him carefully from a distance of some ten yards, and realized he'd been talking to himself. "You okay, man?" the boy—he looked about twenty—asked. He took a step towards Victor in the manner of one observing a potentially dangerous species in the wild. "You lost or something?"

"I'm fine," said Victor. "I was just, . . ." he offered a shrug to express inner complexity, "just working something out."

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The boy, encouraged, moved closer. "Hey, that's cool. That's what it's for, right?"

He spoke in the dreamy, untroubled tones endemic to southern California. He was tall and thin, wearing only a bathing suit patterned with blue fishnets, and beneath his deep tan and his placidity there was the suggestion of belligerence in his mouth, in the thin cracked line of his lips. Victor took a breath and waited for the boy to get bored and go away.

"Like, it's amazing, right? Incredible. Sort of makes you envy those fishies. Just flop around in all that blue wonder all day. Those great technicolor reefs to hide in, y'know? Fish, they've got the right idea. They know how it's done, all right. They've got the big fella's ear."

Victor nodded and waited.

"I mean, check 'em out. They're *wise*, y'know? They've got *knowledge*." He came in closer. "Bum a cigarette? I'm all out."

Victor gave him one and lit it, then lit one for himself, inhaling the smoke so deeply it seemed to orbit the length of his inner space. "I was just thinking of doing some snorkeling," he admitted.

"Best place is up at Xel-Ha. Best snorkeling in the galaxy, man. Ultrasmooth."

"I was headed up that way," said Victor.

"Whereabouts?"

"I thought maybe Playa del Carmen."

"Cool." The boy leaned back to exhale dramatically. "That's where we're staying. Playa's great. They got pizza, Chinese food. Beach's a scene, too. It's full of nakedness, man. Everyone hanging out."

"It sounds like just the thing," said Victor.

"Snorkeling's better down at Xel-Ha, though."

"Well, I have some business, too."

The boy narrowed his eyes. "You a developer?"

"I'm looking for someone."

"Whoa," the boy said, raising his hands in defense. "I don't want to know, alright? I'm a loyal American, hey. Registered to vote and everything."

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Victor decided to enjoy himself. "You don't have to worry," he said, meaningfully. "That is, as long as you play it clean."

"Yeah, well, hey—I'm clean. That's for sure." He was about to discard the cigarette but he looked at Victor sideways and seemed to think better of it. He bent down to extinguish it in the sand, then held onto the butt when he straightened, cradling the broken stub in his palm. That accomplished, he extended his right hand with curious formality in Victor's direction. "Gotta make the bus, man. Nice to meet you. Maybe catch you in Playa later."

Victor took the hand and looked into the boy's shadowed, vacant eyes. He tried to count the boy's years in his features. It did not take long. When he was alone again, he discovered he felt better about being the age he was than he had felt in some time.

* * *

He found Donna Gans quite by accident the next morning. He had spent the night in Playa and risen early—he had been rising early all week—intending to rent some snorkel gear and try the reefs north of town. The scuba shop, however, did not adhere to its posted hours, and so Victor had gone for a walk along the beach. The sand was not nearly so clean as Tulum's—it gave off a distinct odor of sewage where the new bungalows were thickest—and yet he did not feel sorry to be there. He made his way north until the buildings thinned out, and there, in front of the last of a series of thatched huts, tangled in an elaborately rainbowed hammock, holding a paperback volume of Jane Austen above her like a compact mirror—there was Donna Gans.

She wore a modest one-piece bathing suit and a turquoise pendant around her neck. Her skin looked dark and stretched with sun. She was thinner than Victor remembered, flatter in the chest, longer of limb. In fact, she could easily have been someone else. But she wasn't. He knew she wasn't, knew it with a cold intuitive clarity that he found remarkable and somehow inevitably sad. The sight of her was like a taste of

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the world's smallness, its delicacies of predicament, and he had ample time to savor it and to study her without her noticing as he approached, for her head was inclined against her inland shoulder. He was practically upon her when she lowered her book and turned in his direction, "Hi," she said casually. "How's the water this morning?"

"It looks fine," he said. "I haven't been in."

"Oh." She lifted her book again.

"You don't remember me," said Victor. His voice had a hint of lament, which irritated him. "I knew you a long time ago. In L.A."

Her head swung back. She raised one hand to shade her eyes and looked him over unhurriedly.

"My name's Victor Franks. I was a friend of Averick's. We roomed together on 4th Street."

Her mouth went slack. "Mother of god," she moaned. "You're that awful comedian."

"That wasn't me," he said. "That was someone else. I was the guy who worked in radio. Victor."

"Victor Franks." She squinted through her raised hand.

"That's right."

There was a yielding in her face as she tried to fit the name onto a recognition. He was glad that she didn't bother to pretend; that she had the patience to summon memory and await its arrival. Then, when it was there, she smiled slowly, grandly, in triumph. "Victor," she said. "Sure, Victor. Hey, how are you, Victor? What brings you down this way?"

"Actually," he said, "it's a long story."

"No surprise." She fidgeted in the hammock. "I'd ask you to sit down, but as you can see. . ."

"How about if we grab a cup of coffee?"

"I don't drink coffee," she said brightly. "But you can buy me some mango juice. Here, give me a hand. I'm getting too old for this thing."

He helped her out of the hammock and they ducked under the palms and into the small restaurant at the Blue Heron Inn. It was a clean room with simple wood tables, a cut above the other establishments he'd seen in town. From two speakers

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flanking the kitchen came some Jay McShann piano rolls. "You like it?" Donna asked when they were seated. "You better like it. I own the place. Say something nice."

"I like it," said Victor.

"Praise the lord." She grinned widely and brought her hands together. "He likes it. Actually, we're doing very well, thank you. The whole town's on the move, but this—this is the nicest spot. Best view, and I've got the only decent cook in the area. I'm a regular success story."

"I'm happy for you," Victor said, though he did not know her well enough to mean it in any but the most general sense. He wondered for an instant whether she attracted him, or whether anyone did. He suffered a moment's temptation to confess to her something of his confusion, of his massive softness at this juncture of his life where he had expected shape and definition. Perhaps this—she—was his fate, and perhaps Averick had known this. But that didn't make sense. She was someone else's femme fatale; he was no longer so arrogant as to believe that the world's energies went into a single production. Averick was, but he thought that maybe Averick had to be—it was the sort of conceit that lent one adrenaline, that helped marshal force. Where *was* Averick, anyway? For whom was he performing this service?

As if on cue, Donna Gans set down her juice and said, "So tell me, how's our boy these days? Still defending hoodlums in the barrio?"

"It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Oh," she said, and her face changed. "That means he's somewhere else, doesn't it."

"Yes," said Victor.

"Somewhere bad?"

"Yes."

"Don't tell me. He works on Wall Street and commutes to Connecticut. He votes Republican. He drives a station wagon. At night he makes calls for the UJA. Stop me whenever you find appropriate. This is getting depressing."

"He's none of those things," said Victor.

"Oh?"

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"He works for a small firm in Oakland. Mostly non-profit stuff. He isn't married. As for politics, he still reads *The Nation*."

"What, then?"

"He has cancer."

She smiled privately, as though he had said something very different.

"It began in his jaw and then it went away and then it came back in the lungs. It's hard to sort out exactly where it's going. Before I left it was under control."

He told her all he knew of Averick's condition and she listened carefully without asking questions, and then they sat in silence for a short time. Victor looked out through the palm fronds at a lone pelican skimming the brilliant water in search of prey. It didn't seem to require much energy to attain its speed. It glided without effort, a slim white bow over the great blue stringed instrument that was the sea. He's after those wise fish, Victor thought. He's hungry for knowledge. There will be no rest until he finds some.

"Well shit," Donna said finally. "It's all a haze of shit, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said. "Sometimes that's just what it is."

"But it's so pretty here, isn't it. Look. You can see all the way to Cozumel."

"It's beautiful," Victor agreed.

"And the people, the Mexicans, they're wonderful. You know what I like about them? They know about some things and not others. They know about food and drink and song and God. Those things they know. They're weak on data. They don't analyze or process well when it comes to data. There are organizational problems. Distribution of services is deeply flawed. The whole country's a mess, in fact, and the poverty is horrifying, and it's boring and slow around here and I miss going to salad bars and staying up late talking about abstract expressionism with my friends, whom I hardly get to see any more unless somebody dies. Or comes down here, which may be the same thing for all I know. What I'm trying to say is that

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there are any number of reasons not to stay here. But I can't leave."

"You don't have to explain yourself," said Victor. "Not to me."

She cocked her head and squinted at him, as she had on the beach. "I don't?"

"No."

"Then why are you here? What does Averick want?"

He considered the question for a moment. "A legacy. I think he wants a legacy."

"Come again? Victor, you sound a little funny."

Yes, he thought, I am a little funny. "He mentioned something about a daughter he thought might be his. He wanted me to find out."

Me, he thought. What a funny word that is. Me.

"A daughter?" Donna Gans leaned back and let out a burst of laughter, and then another, and then, just after her features had relaxed again, one more. Her shoulders worked in spasmodic shudders; her black hair fell over her cheeks. Victor waited for her to stop, thinking that he didn't really mind; in fact it was pleasant, just sitting there, just carrying through with his purpose. He didn't care so very much about the rest of it.

"I'm sorry," she said, leaning towards him. She wiped at her eyes with one finger, still slightly out of control. "It's just so unexpected and dumb. I miss him so much, all of a sudden." Sighing, she shook her head violently, as though to clear it. "Hoo boy. This is really pitiful."

"I take it he's mistaken," said Victor.

"Poor man. What a number we all pull on each other. How dumb and fantastic."

She retreated into her private thoughts. She looked to Victor to be aglow with pride, or sorrow, or both. He thought she looked quite beautiful and healthy, as if Averick's delusion had tapped in her a reservoir of personal power long unused. He wondered if he should stay there with her, and if she would let him. He wanted again to confess himself. But the young

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girl who had brought them their juice and coffee came forward now to whisper something in Donna's ear. They exchanged a few sentences of Spanish, then the girl moved off in the direction of the kitchen. Donna turned to Victor and made a wry smile. "No," she said. "That isn't her."

Victor shrugged. "It's none of my business, I suppose. But I can't help being curious."

"Of course you can't. It's just that it's so ridiculous I'm ashamed to talk about it." She examined her nails, frowning. "The fact is, I don't have a daughter. I never did. Understand?"

"Not really, no."

"I don't have a daughter. Or a son either. In fact I don't care for children. The point is, it was just something I told Averick at the time, to get him off my back."

Two flies lit on the table between them, and performed a skittish dance.

"I thought, knowing him, he wouldn't give up otherwise. I didn't want him to wait around for me. I didn't want him to wait, understand? I was trying, christ Victor, I was trying to be *kind*."

She began to laugh again, quietly and without mirth. At one point she knocked over her glass of juice, which had been nearly full. It spread in a yellow pool, lumpy and thinning as it ran, seeking out the cracks and imperfections in the surface of the wooden table. It was hot out now and the flies were getting thick; Victor stood up, took off his teeshirt, and dabbed at the pool of juice compulsively. When he had done all he could he backed off and announced, "I'm going to go snorkeling now," and went down to the beach.

He had left his shirt behind, he had not excused himself to Donna, he had not called Averick, he had gone off without having eaten, and without any clear direction as to which were the finest reefs to explore, and yet Victor felt extremely hopeful, awash in light. The sun was directly above him and his body cast no visible shadow. The scuba shop was now open, and he rented a snorkel and mask and some fins that made the simple act of walking like a slog through deepest snow, and

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when he was ready he lowered himself into the green shallows and pushed off from the bottom with his feet. He felt clean and strong. His mouth fit the acrid plastic of the snorkel like a pacifier, and he heard the subtle rhythm of his breath in his ears as he glided through the water. The sea was cool and textured, riddled with particles and light, and stands of coral that flared up from the reefs like a flight of sparks, and he was certain he could stay down there forever. It was like radio, he thought, it was just space and waves, active and passive signals; it enveloped and protected you; it was a continuous flow and you could lie down inside it and from the clamor of the land be exempt. Only there was something funny. There was something wrong. The colors were dimming as he moved ahead and he couldn't really see all that well, and then before too long he could not maintain his depth. None of them could, he was sure of it, it could not have been unique to him, he could not have lost so much of his competence. He fought to see, and to stay down among the silent purposeless fish, but he had to come up, he had to, because his mask had clouded over with the residue of his own breath.

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S. Ben-Tov

Pauses in Indian Flute Music

Breath through the flute like light constrained
in a prism, rays, and is made to weave
a tense web trembling as the notes blow over a

when life hung weightless, but then
caught up again, ring recollecting ring.
The bright air travels now, beginningless as a

which the drumbeat proves exists.
The listeners are following.
Light breaks from cloud to cloud.

Thirteen beats later, suddenly there's a shift
in the wind, tatters fly, colors lose their names,
and with a slow upwelling the flute calls

because it must pause,
and in the moment of breath running backwards
comes laughter from no mouth.

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Michael Covino

In the Poor Part of Town

I lived in the poor part of town
where the hookers hung out on the street corners at night,
and sometimes,
when I'd swing my battered Datsun
off the bright avenue
onto my obscure side street,
they'd trip around the corner after me
on three-inch heels, in luminous spandex jeans
(whose taut sheen threw back the corner streetlight),
inevitably a bit disappointed when I,
climbing out of my car,
would comically shake my head,
as though to say, "No, no. I live here."
("Like you. In the poor part of town.")

I lived in the poor part of town
above a large plumbing shop
whose show window, long after closing,
displayed, as though through fluorescent waters,
an exquisite bed of pearly white bathtubs,
chartreuse marble washbasins with solid brass faucets,
wine-colored toilets with lacquered rosewood seats;
such beauty!—and sometimes,
long after closing time,
I'd stand on the darkened pavement,
palms on the window,
before this pure aquarium,
and feel desolate with a longing
for the nicer part of town.

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I lived in the poor part of town
where the graffiti on the neighborhood walls
wasn't even *U.S. out of Latin America*
or *CIA Puta*
but *WSB*
V *L's R*
—14—
so that I, no scholar, had to write
the State Attorney General's office
requesting the *Report on Youth Gang Violence in California*
with its illustrated graffiti guide
(V = vario, neighborhood of gang; WSB = West Side Berkeley;
L's = Varo Locos, Crazy Ones, actual clique; R = Rifa, rule;
14 = fourteenth letter of alphabet, "N" for "Norte," for La Nuestra Familia of Northern California)
and its practical-minded prose:
Although graffiti is an eyesore, it allows the police to keep track of pending gang conflicts, serves as a roster of gang members, and will often lead to the suspect of a gang-related crime
in the poor part of town.

Yes, I lived in the poor part of town
choosing comically to misunderstand it,
relishing—just a bit—
my "urban marginality."
(Yet I really was poor!)
Poor, yes, me—
me and the other "honest poor"
along with the dishonest poor
who, too (like me),
had their reasons
in the poor part of town.

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I lived in the poor part of town
where, at night, I preferred staying home
watching reruns of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*
rather than drive all the way across town
to catch Hans Syberberg's *Karl May*
followed by a lecture
in the better part of town.

Ah, in the poor part of town
where in poverty I thought I had discovered the world!
—and the few friends who came to visit
would bring a six-pack of Bud
or a bottle of Zinfandel
which we might then share
in the poor part of town.

Yes, in the poor part of town
where the houses are nondescript
and the landscape featureless;
where the streets seem endless
and the sky feels low;
where, after a rain, the slick wet asphalt
glistens like the scene of a crime;
where, late at night, there is always
one crack of light
beneath one door;
where, in the early morning hours,
someone smokes a cigarette
just inside a darkened doorway;
and where, just before dawn,
the mongrel dogs bark angrily
at the slightest stir
in this part of town.

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Robert Bensen

Caprice

I

From tiny up, a *grand jeté* to a slow freight
was basic movement, or losing a footrace *allegro*
to neighborhood punks. And to fast-talk my way
out of a bloody face was next to poetry.

Not till I was twenty-one (with some poems written
unwisely, and not too well) was I to brave
my first real live ballet—not those shrunken
tutued extravaganzas Ed Sullivan introduced

through the novelty of our monochrome Muntz.
This was the genuine Royal Ballet's second string,
strung out in an Oxford theatre up to its flyspace
in mothballs and hock, out to show the provincials

a smattering of repertoire, a whiff of Giselle
and the Sylphs, some offshore drilling on Swan Lake.
Possessed by fatigue and the demon gin,
one boy buttressing his swan, in the throes

of seismic tremor, shook off enough down
that vile Odile's murky entrance riled up
the aftermath of a pillow fight. But the women,
the women rose out of the thick malaise

of Wednesday matinee, heels trilling,
their wingbeats rousing the dank house,
a company of swans exultant in the doom
the crackling record of the violins spelled out

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so plainly even the drowsing hunters heard, ready
left and right to stalk their transfigured loves,
and stepping into the too-blue moonlight
made the arms abhorrent that they bore

but were foresworn to use.

II

I'd pulled over
to watch the frilly boughs unlimber. Downrange a storm
threw
flame through a plaster sky. The rain's thick scrim dropped
behind

the hills like flats for a peasant dance, wildflowers
pinned to the road's sleeve. From the endless woods,
like a twig emerging from so much green, a fawn stood
just shy of the road. She looked at me so steadily

I looked away. And she was gone. The trees closed ranks
on sparrow's trim complaint, on ovenbird's blues,
on mockingbird who mimics what he isn't,
on owl who doubts the only thing he knows.

Down where daylight paused among the ferns,
the fawn answered all those rimers on her toes
and improvised a run that was half flight
from the shifty-eyed thing she found, and half fun,

her white tail cutting patterns deeper and deeper
in the crosshatched wood, her way graphed
by flowering shad and bridalwreath the dusk had lit
above her trackless path like chandeliers.

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Four Poems by Nathalie Anderson

Cymophobia
Fear of Waves

Happy baby. Bobbing. Strong arm. Slap. Hard
water. Bottle-green swells smack, splatter. Chuck
the chin. Bluster. Rip-roaring rumpus. Scutched.
Scuttled. Fathomless undertone.

Mumble. Mutter. Hugging the shore. An arm
to step over. A finger. Toddler. Hand
on the ankle. Grip, gripe. Carom. Cuff. Crest.
Sea legs knee-deep. Spanking. Spanking.

Sullen. Sullen. Muscled shallows hunch, hump
at the bunk bed. Shrimp. Squirt. Grunt. Grumble. Grim
bone-bruiser. Shunter. Lurcher. Breaker. No
kidding around. Knock down drag out. Keeps.

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Aulophobia
Fear of Flutes

Right or wrong. Three silver birches
bar the window. So nearly straight.
Wind thin as a shiv. Desperate
teeth behind their silver bar.

Grasp and twist. Silver splits, shreds, flays.
Diminuendo. Lips blister,
stops spew hoarse waxy curds. Spiked through,
the rag's scummy. Trill. Tremolo.

Keen, you were keen. Tense. Again tense.
Keep it shrill. Knife at the teeth, wind
like a shiv. Upright, unfallen.
Silver birch. Silver blade. Spike. Bleb.

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Erythrophobia
Fear of Blushing

Oh ho she said. What's this I see. Red flag?
Blood and thunder? Bleeding heart? Smirk. Didder.
Rankles, does it? Galls? Don't slop over. Don't
gush. Quench it. Snuff it. Go dead-pan. Blue ruin.

Not how it looks. No blood-bath. No heart-throb.
A hairline fracture. A brain wave. Seepage.
Tremor. Melting point. Hot wind. Not heart-struck.
Not red-handed. Talk. Talk. Blue in the face?

Mayday. Mayday. Thin-skinned are you? Smirk. Smirch.
Squirm. Look at you. Gaudy. Deep-dye. Port wine.
Blot it up. Quench it. Snuff it out. Oh ho.
Shimmer, swelter, scorcher. Auto da fé.

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Nephophobia
Fear of Clouds

Dead calm. They're on you before you feel them.
Flecked with them. Reek of the invisible
rasp, the livid trail. The sky's glaucous, blotched
with gleet. Creeping. Creeping.

Maggots. Slugs. Leeches. Pasty wraiths bloated,
leaden. And shifty—torpid turns turbid,
roils and spits, banks off into blear. Grizzled.
They're on you. Scuts, scuts spuming.

As the driven snow? as fleece? as feathers?
Sluts. Sluttish. On you before you feel them.
The brackish snuffle. Invisible rasp.
Slinking. Dissolute. Smut. Smut.

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Brenda Hillman

Meridian Plinth

The gravestone-looking slab donated to the college
for instructing students about light and dark
and the rotation of the world stands solemnly
in the courtyard being landed on by buff-colored
sparrows with shining breasts and claws. It is
summer in the suburbs and the voices of students
seem to travel a long way from the field
as light has had to travel from far off
to abide in this rock. Two steel pegs
and a chart that looks like a quarter of a pie
etched into the granite will show the passage
of the sun, and in the grooved triple name
of the donor, in the E for east and W for west,
in the other grooves flecked by mica today
the light from noon looks a bit forlorn.

The seven-souled vestments of the flesh
were supposed to keep light in mankind. Secret
names should have been learned by now to ease
its passage back to its home but were not learned.
And the sun striking down at noon like this—
because it insists on moving—the sun
seems ancillary to the stone, and weaker;
it has to move and last forever, or a little less
long than the imagination. If you stand
very near the plinth you can feel the stored
heat of its mass, and the different kinds of light
being saved for you. The parallel worlds
are stacked up and rub against each other,
the worlds we read of in the texts that have to fit
neatly inside each other, one after another,

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like a child's bathtub blocks fit, or as your
lover fits. It is the same in the universe:
surely the dark world holds the other close;

and when the time comes, something from outside fate
will come to retrieve the divine sparks.
As dandelions travel from the dry hills today,
or the woman with the baby, coming across the lawn:
maybe *they* are the redeemers. Remember
how the heavenly messengers sometimes
look like tourists, arriving unawares, and after
they feast they become special. When all
the sparks have been retrieved the cosmos
will be finished, the milky light of the suburbs
cleared of blossoms, of physical terror,
and of juncos with their responsible
white shears, trimming the fabric of the day. . .

But of the suffering inherent in matter,
what shall we say? That it goes back
when we go back? That it will die when we do?
If it goes there with us how far away?
Perhaps it will be left, and the plinth
can hold it for us, and go on with its job
of being patient in the sun while the mountain
makes more irreducible granite, more of itself.
The plinth was meant to please and instruct,
holding odd shards of radiance inside;
it wants to live. Stand next to it.
In the other noon, it casts no shadow.

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Jim Harrison

from the Dalva notebook, 1985-87

The thirteen year old girl walks out into the damp moonlight. It's after midnight and I'm trying to imagine the freshness of her emotions.

Only when I'm fatigued do I worry about being vindicated.

I explained to ___ that life was a darkly mysterious process to which our culture increases us so we won't become useless citizens

I'm inventing a country song, "Gettin' too Old to Run Away." In the middle of these sloppy ironies I remembered the tremendous silence of the mid-day eclipse last summer. Valise was confused & the birds roosted early. I was full of uncontrollable anger because I had to leave for L.A. in a few days for a screenplay conference. No one liked my idea of the life of Edward Curtis except me.

In a dream a ranch foreman named Samuel Checkmouth appeared to me and told me how to behave. I became irritable but in the morning had a lucid & jubilant version of what the novel was to be.

On the walk there were two small beaver, a huge black snake, a great blue heron feathering into a SW wind, sand dunes caving into a ferrous sea, on a rare hot day in late April.

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A manuscript page from Jim Harrison's Dalva *notebook.*

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The Art of Fiction CIV
Jim Harrison

This interview was conducted over a five-day period in mid-October of 1986 at Jim Harrison's farm in Leelanau County, Michigan. It was the middle of the bird-hunting season, and his friends, painter Russell Chatham and writer Guy de la Valdene, were staying with the Harrisons, as they have every fall for the past thirteen years. Harrison chose this particular time for the interview because it was essentially his only free time of the year, and because, as he put it, it is a time when he "tends to be intensely voluble and cheerful." Both Harrison and his wife of twenty-seven years, Linda, are accomplished

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cooks, as are Chatham and de la Valdene, and this is also, it must be said, a fattening time. An enormous portion of each day is devoted to planning, shopping for, preparing, discussing, and finally eating one breathtaking meal after another, at the end of which preliminary discussions and preparations for the next meal begin almost immediately.

A threatening sign outside, DO NOT ENTER THIS DRIVEWAY UNLESS YOU HAVE CALLED FIRST. THIS MEANS YOU, is belied by the inside of the farmhouse, a hospitable home with bookcases lining the walls, dogs and cats comfortably reclined on the furniture. I arrived in the evening, just in time to participate in a dinner party for twelve, so there was even more activity in the kitchen—the soul of the house—than usual; a lot of tasting from saucepans by guests and chefs alike, a certain amount of pilferage off the butcher block countertops by the pets, and much good-natured squabbling, giving of orders and unsolicited cooking advice, mostly ignored. There is a brief uproar when Harrison discovers that someone has tampered with his game sauce; he demands to know who and why. For dinner we are being served an appetizer of woodcock, with grouse as an entree, as well as sundry side dishes, including marvelous garlic mashed potatoes, for which Linda has poached thirty cloves of garlic in butter.

Jim Harrison is a dark-skinned, robust man, with a Pancho Villa style moustache—oddly Latin in appearance, although he is of Scandinavian heritage. He's been described as looking like a block layer (which he indeed was), a beer salesman, and a sumo wrestler; he bears himself with a most unique kind of physical grace, indescribable except to say that it has something to do with a style of movement which is not precisely linear. His eye—blinded in a childhood accident—is sighted off on a different plane, increasing the feeling that Harrison is a man with his own unique sense of balance.

Harrison is the author of seven books of fiction, including the novels Dalva *(1988),* Sundog *(1984), and* Wolf *(1971), and the collection of novellas* Legends of the Fall *(1979); but he*

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began writing as a poet, and has published six collections of poetry, most recently The Theory and Practice of Rivers and Other Poems *(1986).*

Because he prefers to be on the move, out of a total of almost fifteen hours of taped conversation only about two hours' worth was conducted in any kind of a formal interview fashion—seated in Harrison's office, a converted granary near the house, or at my room in a nearby lodge on Lake Michigan, a room in which he had written much of Legends of the Fall. *The rest was conducted informally, in conversation with the tape recorder running while touring the northern Michigan countryside in his car, or walking through the woods and fields with his bird dogs. Sometimes he carried a shotgun, although considerably more talking was done than hunting.*

Conversing with the poet-novelist is somehow akin to watching his dogs work the cover for birds. They race off on tangents, describing broad loops and arcs, or tight circles, always returning in a controlled, if circuitous, pattern that is at once instinct, training, ritual, and play.

Harrison is a man of prodigious memory and free-wheeling brilliance and erudition, as well as great spirit and generosity, lightness and humor; so the reader should imagine wild giggles and laughter throughout, and supply them even when they seem inappropriate—especially when they seem inappropriate. Imagine, too, the sounds and the textures in the background of the tapes: the easy talk of friends and hunting cronies, the light, cold drizzle of the wettest fall in Michigan history, sodden leaves and branches underfoot, and always the ringing of the dogs' bells, sometimes nearby, sometimes barely discernible, fading into the woods.

A final editing of this interview was accomplished over a two-day period at his publisher's house in Key West, Florida, where Harrison, with his family, was taking a much-needed ten-day break from work on his novel Dalva.

JIM HARRISON

I wrote this in my notebook: "My favorite moment in life

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is when I give my dog a fresh bone." That comes from being the blinded seven-year-old hiding out in the shrubbery with his dog, whom he recognized as his true friend.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think your childhood accident when you lost sight in one eye gave you a different way of looking at things?

HARRISON

Probably. I understand they believe that in other cultures, especially when it's the left eye.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to have a remarkable memory for the events of your childhood, which you use a lot in your work.

HARRISON

It's nondiscriminate and that's why you have to work hard at it. In terms of classic Freudianism, if you have a knot in your past that stops the flow of your life, it's a psychic impediment. Your memories enlarge in ways proportionally to how willing you are to allow them to enlarge.

INTERVIEWER

Do you believe that a good memory is an essential attribute for a writer because it gives one a deeper well to draw from?

HARRISON

Sometimes I wish I could forget more things. I have to make a conscious effort to free my mind, open it again because memory can be tremendously rapacious. Was it to you that I said jokingly that I had to go out and collect some new memories, I'm going dry? That's why I like movement.

INTERVIEWER

This idea of movement and the metaphor of the river, seem to be central to your work.

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HARRISON

It's the origin of the thinking behind *The Theory and Practice of Rivers*. In a life properly lived, you're a river. You touch things lightly or deeply; you move along because life herself moves, and you can't stop it; you can't figure out a banal game plan applicable to all situations; you just have to go with the "beingness" of life, as Rilke would have it. In *Sundog*, Strang says a dam doesn't stop a river, it just controls the flow. Technically speaking, you can't stop one at all.

INTERVIEWER

But you have to work at it, make a conscious effort so that your life flows like a river?

HARRISON

Antaeus magazine wanted me to write a piece for their issue about nature. I told them I couldn't write about nature but that I'd write them a little piece about getting lost and all the profoundly good aspects of being lost—the immense fresh feeling of really being lost. I said there that my definition of magic in the human personality, in fiction and in poetry, is the ultimate level of attentiveness. Nearly everyone goes through life with the same potential perceptions and baggage, whether it's marriage, children, education, or unhappy childhoods, whatever; and when I say attentiveness I don't mean just to reality, but to what's exponentially possible in reality. I don't think, for instance, that Márquez is pushing it in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*—that was simply his sense of reality. The critics call this "magic realism," but they don't understand the Latin world at all. Just take a trip to Brazil. Go into the jungle and take a look around. This old Chippewa I know—he's about seventy-five years old—said to me, "Did you know that there are people who don't know that every tree is different from every other tree?" This amazed him. Or don't know that a nation has a soul as well as a history, or that the ground has ghosts that stay in one area. All this is true, but why are people incapable of ascribing to the natural world the kind of

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mystery which they think they are somehow deserving of but have never reached? This attentiveness is your main tool in life, and in fiction, or else you're going to be boring. As Rimbaud said, which I believed very much when I was nineteen and which now I've come back to, for our purposes as artists, everything we are taught is false—everything.

INTERVIEWER

How did you think at age fourteen that you might want to be a poet?

HARRISON

Those years, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, are a vital time in anybody's life, also a tormenting time. I wanted to be a preacher for a while, but then it seemed to me that whatever intelligence I had wouldn't allow it. That again would be a question of leaving out the evidence. So I think all my religious passions adapted themselves to art as a religion.

INTERVIEWER

Did you always read a lot?

HARRISON

Yes. My father was a prodigious reader and passed on the habit. He was an agriculturist but he also read all of Hemingway and Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell. He read indiscriminately. Both my parents did.

INTERVIEWER

That had to have been valuable training for you.

HARRISON

A large part of writing is a recognition factor, to have read enough to know what good writing is. Finally, what Wallace Stevens said, which I love and which is hard to explain to younger writers, is that technique is the proof of your seriousness.

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INTERVIEWER

Did your rural background in any way prepare you to become a poet?

HARRISON

My background used to embarrass me. I'd think, I want to be like Lord Byron, or Vincent van Gogh. And then I'd realize, how can a boy from a little farm town do that?

INTERVIEWER

Didn't that give you more incentive to break out?

HARRISON

And I think more power. I think the years I spent at manual labor as a block layer, a carpenter, a digger of well pits, have given me more physical endurance for later in my life. And in an utterly corny Sherwood Anderson way, it makes you think those long thoughts. If you're unloading fertilizer trucks for a dollar an hour all day long, and dreaming about New York City, it really means something. I remember a month before my first book of poems came out, I was working on a house foundation and the lumber truck couldn't get close enough to the excavation, so I had to wheelbarrow 1200 cement blocks for about seventy yards, load them and unload them. It was a cold, icy, early November day and it took me about nine hours to do it. That day I manually handled thirty-five tons worth of cement blocks, and that was for two and a half dollars an hour. When I got home I was hungry and tired, and what I had to show for it was right around twenty-five dollars. But you got a lot of thinking done.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that the physical endurance you developed in those years somehow translates onto the written page?

HARRISON

I've never thought about that. What it does do for you is,

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if you can hoe corn for fifty cents an hour, day after day, you can learn how to write a novel. You have absorbed the spirit of repetition. When you look at my wife's garden you understand that; the beauty of the garden—the flowers and the vegetables—that's how an artist is in his work. And I think the background that at first nonplussed me—that rural, almost white-trash element—stood me in good stead as an artist, in the great variety of life it forced me into, the hunger to do things. Joseph in *Farmer* wanting to see the ocean—that's a reflection of my background. I can't tell you the thrill I had when I hitchhiked to California to look at the Pacific. And then the same way with New York City. Our family had no money—there were five children—and I accumulated ninety dollars and my dad gave me a ride out to the highway. I had my favorite books and the typewriter he'd given me for my seventeenth birthday—one of those twenty-buck used typewriters—and my clothes, all in a cardboard box tied with a rope, and I was going off to live in "Green-witch" Village. I was going to be a bohemian! I think I'd seen pictures of bohemians in *Life* magazine, and that's what I wanted to be. Also the girls looked really pretty. They had straight black hair and they wore turtlenecks. And my dad thought it was all fine. He wasn't insistent about me finishing college at the time. He knew that Hemingway and Faulkner didn't go to college.

INTERVIEWER

What were the books you took with you?

HARRISON

Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, in that Louise Varese translation, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury, The King James Bible,* Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

INTERVIEWER

Having begun your career as a poet, how did you make the transition to fiction?

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HARRISON

I fell off a cliff while bird hunting and hurt myself, and I had to be in traction for a month. I had a long convalescence. Fortunately, I had the Guggenheim that year, or we would have been bankrupt. Tom McGuane suggested I write a novel while I was convalescing, and that's how I wrote *Wolf.* I sent it off and for a month it was lost in the mail strike. It was the only copy. When they accepted it for publication I was somewhat surprised. I thought, oh good, here's something else I can do, because the dominant forces in my life had always been novelists, along with a few poets.

INTERVIEWER

In its form, *Wolf* is quite unconventional. It has a very personal, almost confessional quality. Does that reflect your background as a poet?

HARRISON

At the time I hadn't written any fiction other than juvenilia, so naturally *Wolf* was a poet's book. I even have grave doubts whether it's a novel at all. That's why I called it a false memoir. I certainly came to the novel backwards, because poets practice an overall scrutiny habitually, and what's good later for their novels is that they practice it pointillistically. You read some reasonably good novelists who tell a story well enough in terms of a flat narrative, but they never notice anything interesting, whereas a poet has folded and unfolded his soul somewhat like an old-fashioned laundry girl with the linen. His self is his vocation. As W.C. Williams said, "no ideas but in things."

INTERVIEWER

Wolf is a very angry book.

HARRISON

Wolf reminds me somewhat of a heartbroken boy up on the barn roof, just sort of yelling. I've certainly become a nicer person over the years.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you think you've become nicer, or less angry, as a result of age?

HARRISON

I don't think it's a result of age because, if anything, people get angrier as they go along. I think it's the result of a particularly long effort to make myself sane, at least on my own terms. As Ortega y Gasset said, "With no standard nothing has merit and man is capable of using even sublimity to degrade himself." An artist has to evolve some standards, because nobody's asking you to do this, and what you think of as your muse is really a couple dozen violent bacchantes.

INTERVIEWER

Along these lines, Faulkner once said that nothing could ruin a first-rate talent, to which Norman Mailer replied that Faulkner made more asinine remarks than any other major American novelist.

HARRISON

Except for Mailer. I think Faulkner was always defensive and he gave Chinese answers. And that question of the formation and disintegration of personality is such an enormous subject, an imponderable thing. Of course alcohol and drugs, marriage, jobs, everything can ruin talent if allowed to. But these are inscrutables, and finally Mailer is right and Faulkner is right, and the fact remains that Faulkner really ruined his talent later in his life with whiskey. I certainly know when I'm doing so. For instance, the whole first section of this new book I'm working on, *Dalva*, is written from the voice of a woman, and I can't get into her voice if I've had too much to drink the night before; I can't slip into her persona because it requires a conscious effort every day. The best thing I've ever read on the subject of alcohol and the writer was by Walker Percy, who defined it as a "re-entry" problem. The writer works in this totally solitary universe, and to re-enter the world he has to have

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a couple of belts, then a couple of belts on top of a couple of belts. And most people drink for no other reason than that they started drinking. It's essentially a sedative, and if you're a manic depressive in the first place, which is basically my configuration, you sometimes need a lot of sedation. But this is not a profitable question in the long run, because what Faulkner called the raw meat on the floor is whether you do the job or not, and eventually everyone knows if you did the job or not. The fact is, I can only think of one American in our time who's lived up to the full promise of his talent, and that's Saul Bellow. He's the only person who brought his talent to the fruition that seemed promised way back with his first work.

INTERVIEWER

After *Wolf*, your next novel, *A Good Day To Die*, took a more traditional form as a narrative. Was that a natural progression from poetry into fiction?

HARRISON

No, I think it was the influence of Raymond Chandler and John D. MacDonald. I wanted to tell one of those simple tales that has a great deal of narrative urgency, propelled by characters who, once you've met them, you know it's going to be a godawful mess. These are people that nobody wants in their living room . . . except maybe Sylvia, in her white cotton underpants.

INTERVIEWER

I can see where some people might find these characters objectionable. That's a disturbing book.

HARRISON

The book came out of the feeling of the late sixties. In a sense it was the first Vietnam book. A critic in New York told me that such people don't exist, and I said, well, I'm afraid they do, in enormous quantity, as we were to see later.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you think the fact that you often write about people who are not exactly "mainstream" type characters has hurt you in terms of critical acceptance?

HARRISON

It's occurred to me that some of the awkwardness I have in reception—not that I can't write badly—is because the kind of people I write about are utterly alien to almost everyone in the reviewing media.

INTERVIEWER

Has it been a problem for you being labeled a "Michigan" or a "midwestern" writer?

HARRISON

What I hate about this notion of regionalism in literature is that there's no such thing as regional literature. There might be literature with a pronounced regional flavor, but it's either literature on aesthetic grounds or it's not literature. In the view of those on the Eastern seaboard, everything which is not amorphous, anything that has any peculiarities of geography, is considered regional fiction, whereas if it's from New York, it's evidently supposed to be mainstream. I told my agent, Bob Dattila, years ago that it struck me that the Upper East Side of New York was constitutionally the most provincial place I'd ever been. As far as interests go, it's as circumscribed as say, Fergus Falls, Minnesota, which is a Catholic farm community—it's that specific.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that it's still more difficult for a writer working in a different part of the country, with the possible exception of the South, to be recognized in New York?

HARRISON

It's only a question of contiguity, population density and literary friendships. Think of all the column inches the Mets

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got when they weren't very good. The media loathed the World Series between St. Louis and Kansas City. It's the same way with novelists.

INTERVIEWER

You make forays into New York, but you've managed to maintain a certain isolation here at your farm and at your cabin in the Upper Peninsula.

HARRISON

I'm lucky to be rurally oriented because I save myself a lot of problems by being where I am, by being that remote. I'm not overburdened by the regional concerns of New York. I think of Mailer or Vonnegut, and these are brilliant, brilliant people, and somebody's always pushing a microphone in their faces. Writers aren't trained that way. In terms of wisdom, we're usually not much smarter than the modern living page of the daily newspaper, and we can't always come up with something on the spot; so we're often made to sound stupid when forced to react spontaneously in a media situation.

INTERVIEWER

Did you participate in the recent international PEN conference?

HARRISON

No. My feeling about that is that there's nothing I can say about those issues that someone like Doctorow can't say better. Politically I'm clumsy and full of rages. Mailer, who tends to be a very genuine creature, arranged literally the best conference ever. He even got Donald Trump to pick up the room rates so these threadbare writers were living better than usual, and then they all jumped on him. What I particularly don't understand is that ignorance—when they had Shultz come in and speak and a lot of them booed him. If the purpose of PEN is to get imprisoned foreign writers out of jail, you'd think the first thing they'd do is tend to be a little polite to those in a position to help. Instead they booed him. They did that because most of us are terribly compromised people and we pick

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these little items to try to maintain our integrity. They get in a snit over George Shultz, who's a pushover, right? I would want to subdue my notion of integrity and get some writers out of jail.

INTERVIEWER

I know you taught for a year at Stony Brook, and that you disliked it. You've remarked in the past about "academic" writers. Anything more to say about this?

HARRISON

That's probably an old horse that doesn't need to be beaten any more. It wasn't very profitable in the first place. Certainly there are some very good writers who perforce teach, and they're not academic writers. There's the old notion I loathe of the writer as some kind of hysterical Ichabod Crane—the oddball on campus. That's a very comfortable existence, but I don't know if it's good for you finally. Certain professors will say, "I'm glad to see you're still writing poems," as if you've left the essential integrity of the teaching profession to defile yourself. I said a nasty thing in an interview once: "I'm always being lectured on integrity by professors who've spent a lifetime slobbering at the public trough."

INTERVIEWER

Early in your career as a poet you received a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and then a Guggenheim. In terms of encouragement, how important was that to you?

HARRISON

It was fine as long as it lasted but then it was absolutely grueling for years and years. I had a bit of a drinking problem which didn't make it any better. Those kinds of problems emphasize your basic manic-depressive tendencies. You had a boom-or-bust mentality. You'd make a little money, then you'd run down and buy a bottle of whiskey and some steaks, and everybody would be happy. It's how most blacks and Indians have to live.

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INTERVIEWER

As humiliating as it is to have to live that way, is there finally anything strengthening about it?

HARRISON

How are they going to kill you if you've been through all that? You tend to take everything that passes afterwards with a grain of salt. The idea of getting bad reviews is not nearly as bad as getting no reviews, frankly. And it never stopped me from writing poems and novels, it didn't slow me down a bit. That comes from too deep a source. It's something you have to do. And at any given time during those fourteen or fifteen hard, impossible years I could have taken a well-paid teaching job, because I had that cachet as a poet and a novelist, but I refused to do it.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever get to the point where you thought you were just never going to make it?

HARRISON

Yes, I did. *Wolf* actually did quite well for a first novel, and *A Good Day To Die* did all right, but the heartbreaker for me was the absolute failure of *Farmer.* That was something I couldn't handle because it just slipped beneath the waters. I think Viking took out one one-inch ad for it. That was a difficult period and I couldn't maintain my sanity. I had a series of crack-ups. I was at the point where I couldn't pay my taxes, which were a feeble amount. My oldest daughter won a full scholarship but I couldn't fill out the forms because I had no IRS returns to show what I made. That was the period out of which I wrote *Letters to Yesenin*, which is the book I've gotten the most mail on.

INTERVIEWER

Letters to Yesenin deals with the consideration of suicide. At the end you come out against it as a valid option in your

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own life. Did you know right then that it was totally out of the question?

HARRISON

I knew I'd been thinking about it during that bad period in the back of my mind, but I finally couldn't entertain the thought because I'd seen it in my circumstances as an utterly selfish and stupid thing to do, and then I evolved this theory that even the next meal is worth waiting for. Also I wrote, "My three-year-old daughter's red robe hangs from the doorknob shouting stop."

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that so many artists, perhaps poets in particular, commit suicide because they've painted themselves into a corner?

HARRISON

Sure, and they don't have any resources left to get out. A metaphor isn't a free lunch, and you get the kind of metaphor that keeps you alive not that often. Sometimes you have to stay alive merely because you are alive. Of course, people commit suicide in a state of derangement where they don't realize that this is the last chance—they're not quite aware of it at the time. It seems a temporary measure.

INTERVIEWER

After you'd made that decision, "decided to stay," as you put it at the end of *Letters to Yesenin*, what happened then?

HARRISON

Curiously, things kept going downhill. I would get cheated on the most minor little screenplay. I'd write one for money and then they wouldn't pay me. These things kept happening. My older daughter is still angry about what we went through, and I must admit I am occasionally. But there's nothing unique about it, and all it does is make you enormously cyni-

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cal. At the end of that ghastly time I met Jack Nicholson on the set of McGuane's movie, *The Missouri Breaks*. We got talking and he asked me if I had one of my novels with me, and I had one, I think it was *Wolf*. He read it and enjoyed it. He told me that if I ever got an idea for him, to call him up. Well, I never have any of those ideas. I wasn't even sure what he meant. I think he said later that I was the only one he ever told that to who never called. A year afterwards, I was out in L.A. and he called up and asked me to go to a movie. It was really pleasant, and I was impressed with his interest in every art form. It was right after *Cuckoo's Nest* and all these people tried to swarm all over him after the movie. Anyway, later he heard I was broke and he thought it was unseemly. So he rigged up a deal so that I could finish the book I had started, which was *Legends of the Fall*.

INTERVIEWER

After your initial financial success, didn't you blow a tremendous amount of money and get yourself back into trouble?

HARRISON

The first seventeen years of our marriage we averaged less than ten grand a year; so I was a babe in the woods, and the money junkies—the lawyers, brokers, accountants—can see you coming a mile away. For two years I was simply the Leon Spinks of the literary world. One morning, during the first year of success, I was reading the *Detroit Free Press* and I sort of got the shakes because it suddenly occurred to me that I'd gone from making ten grand to making as much money that year as the president of General Motors. Well, how are you supposed to be sane? Now that it's calmed down it's nice. I'm not making a third as much money, but at least I have a nice life. And that's what we all want, isn't it? Who wants to be crazy? I don't.

INTERVIEWER

In the last few years you've done a good deal of screenplay

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writing. Does it worry you that you're spending too much time at it, to the detriment of your fiction?

HARRISON

Naturally, I worry about that. But it's the only way I can make a living. I don't have any other way of getting any money. I have no other gifts except what I can pull out of my hat, my imagination. I made a very conscious choice between teaching and the film business. If I hadn't made a mess of my life, I could make a reasonably good living off my novels. I'm close to it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you enjoy writing screenplays?

HARRISON

Yes, I always have, but just lately, going from one to another, I'm getting tired of it. But nobody made me do it. McGuane and I had a talk about this. The reason that writers get submerged in the film business is simply a result of ordinary human greed. There's nothing literary about it—it's just greed. Why should I blame Warner Brothers for my own greed? Faulkner always presented himself as this martyr to Hollywood. Well, bullshit. His family evolved such a high nut that he had to keep doing it, because he was supporting seventeen people—his brother's children, retainers, aunts, uncles, an alcoholic wife—and whether old Billy wanted to go to L.A. or not they stuck that sucker on the train and shot him out there to make some more money.

INTERVIEWER

Wasn't there at one point a deal where John Huston was going to direct the screenplay you'd written of your novella "Revenge," and Jack Nicholson was going to star in it?

HARRISON

My major disappointment in Hollywood was when that deal

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fell apart. But now, as I get older, that sort of thing doesn't bother me so much.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still keep in touch with Nicholson?

HARRISON

Sure, we're friends. He's an extraordinary person, really literate and intensely perceptive. I don't know any novelists who are more perceptive than he is, which after all is central to his profession too—to be perceptive about character. He's always aware of how people around him are changing, just as he's changing. He never tries to locate people or make them stay in one place.

INTERVIEWER

This is perhaps another old horse that doesn't need to be beaten any more, but you've been accused of being a "macho" writer. Anything more to say about that one?

HARRISON

All I have to say about that macho thing goes back to the idea that my characters aren't from the urban dream-coasts. A man is not a foreman on a dam project because he wants to be macho. That's his job, a job he's evolved into. A man isn't a pilot for that reason either—he's fascinated by airplanes. A farmer wants to farm. But you know what it's like here and up in the Upper Peninsula. This is where I grew up. How is it macho that I like to hunt and fish? I've been doing it since I was four. I have always thought of the word "macho" in terms of what it means in Mexico—a particularly ugly peacockery, a conspicuous cruelty to women and animals and children, a gratuitous viciousness. You don't write—an artist doesn't create, or very rarely creates—good art in support of different causes. And critics have an enormous difficulty separating the attitudes of your characters from your attitudes as a writer. You have to explain to them: I am not all the men

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in my novels. How could I be? I'm little Jimmy back here on the farm with my wife and two daughters, and, at one time, three female horses, three female cats, and three female dogs, and I'm quite a nice person. So how can I be all these lunatics?

INTERVIEWER

Nevertheless, there is clearly a lot of you in many of your protagonists, and though they are very different people in many ways, with different backgrounds and professions, you can almost see them growing from one to the next. More recently, you seem to be coming off that a bit.

HARRISON

I think so. That's what I've become exhausted with. The reason I revere Faulkner is that he was such a pure storyteller, in the Conradian sense. He created a whole world, a whole reality, and any time you don't aim to do that, you're somehow involved in contemporary gossip. I don't want to piss myself away on that kind of nonsense. And it's always this hyper gossip that turns out to be the most popular in any given age. Frankly, I can't imagine a nastier or more exhausting profession because in the long run you spend your life pulling everything out of your ass. Remember Coleridge's great quote: "What webs of deceit the spider spins out of his big hanging ass." That's in Coleridge's notebooks. I love that.

INTERVIEWER

Has there been a conscious progression from the intensely personal material of your first novel to what you're trying to do now?

HARRISON

Hopefully. This time, in *Dalva*, the first third and last third of the book are written from the voice of a woman. Why that's been brutally hard is that you don't get to use any of your easy accumulation of male resonances.

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INTERVIEWER

How do you give yourself the voice of a woman?

HARRISON

It's taken about three years of hard work and, as such, is a trade secret.

INTERVIEWER

As long as we're on the subject, who are some of the women novelists you admire?

HARRISON

I don't think of women novelists but writers. Who do I read when they have something coming out? Denise Levertov, Joan Didion, Joyce Carol Oates, Diane Wakoski, Renata Adler, Alison Lurie, Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, Ellen Gilchrist, Anne Tyler, Adrienne Rich, Rebecca Newth, Rosellen Brown, Gretel Ehrlich, Annie Dillard, Susan Sontag. Those come immediately to mind. Also Margaret Atwood.

INTERVIEWER

You have said that you can't be a good artist unless you have a very well-developed feminine side.

HARRISON

That's largely unaccepted but absolutely true. It comes from an idea in the area of psychology. The work of a man named James Hillman, an unbelievably brillant man, has helped me to understand certain things. He asks, what have we done with our twin sister who we abandoned at birth? A man usually gives up the feminine because of our culture.

INTERVIEWER

When you're writing about something that you can't know personally, is there ever any question of cheating?

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HARRISON

No, because you live through it in your imagination, and you have to trust the truth of your heart's affections and the imagination.

INTERVIEWER

You've always written your novels very quickly. Are you changing your work habits on this one?

HARRISON

Writing out of this woman's voice has been so enormously difficult. I've never had more than a three-page day with her. It makes you feel like an ineffective bulldog, you keep worrying it and worrying it and nothing has come fast at all. And you have to wait until the bread comes fresh from the oven. I don't know if she's going to talk to me today or not. It's been sort of spooky.

INTERVIEWER

Does the speed with which you usually write your novels have something to do with the poetry process?

HARRISON

Yes, because you've already thought and brooded about it a lot. I think I wrote "Legends of the Fall," the title story, in about ten days. "Revenge" in about ten days. "The Man Who Gave Up His Name" was a little slower, that was probably two weeks. It just came that fast, it all came at once, and I couldn't "not" write it down that fast. Of course, those were some real long days—some eighteen-hour days. And I've never done that before or since.

INTERVIEWER

Do you keep to a specific schedule when you're working?

HARRISON

With this woman, I've had good luck starting very early in the morning which I've never been able to do before. My optimum hours are between two and four in the afternoon. I don't

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know why and it aggravates me. It's a circadian rhythm I can't avoid. And then between eleven and one at night. I always work a split shift.

INTERVIEWER

Does it require a discipline to maintain that schedule?

HARRISON

After you've been in it this long there's no such thing as discipline. You write it when it's ready to be written. And I've tried several times to start novels when they weren't there and that's tremendously discouraging and anguishing. It's dog-paddling, and fraught with the stupidest kinds of anxieties.

INTERVIEWER

What do you do when you can't write?

HARRISON

I wonder, when a writer's blocked and doesn't have any resources to pull himself out of it, why doesn't he jump in his car and drive around the U.S.A.? I went last winter for seven thousand miles and it was lovely. Inexpensive too. A lot of places—even good motels—are only twenty-five dollars in the winter, and food isn't much because there aren't any good restaurants. You pack along a bunch of stomach remedies and a bottle of whiskey.

INTERVIEWER

Is the gestation period a conscious process?

HARRISON

Much of it, although the best things seem to arrive unconsciously, somewhat in the manner that your dreams invent people you don't know.

INTERVIEWER

You said earlier that one's dream life is the foundation of art.

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HARRISON

It is for everyone whether they like it or not. Or that sleeping/waking period early in the morning. Your brain has spent the night evolving a sequence of metaphors that allows you to survive the day, and sometimes it comes out in such poignant, distinctive terms.

INTERVIEWER

Hemingway spoke about stopping work when it was going well and then not thinking about it until the next day. Can you actually shut down the process at the end of the workday?

HARRISON

Not altogether successfully. You want to give it as much chance to occur as possible, but not too much. It's similar to that Faulknerian notion that if you grovel before the muse, she'll only kick you in the teeth. You have to court her, do little dances, all these things you do to keep right with her.

INTERVIEWER

Don't you also do very little rewriting?

HARRISON

That's just an artificiality. The people who do a lot of rewriting haven't thought about it for three years. Some writers work it out on paper and I work it out mentally beforehand. It's only a habit.

INTERVIEWER

I know that you allow very little, if any, editing of your work once it goes to the publisher. Why is that?

HARRISON

Because I know what I want to say. If they want to publish the novel, fine, if not, not. I've been over it four or five times, so why should I let them fool with it? They're not writers.

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INTERVIEWER

I don't know many writers who don't feel that they couldn't benefit at some point from sound editorial assistance.

HARRISON

A woman at Viking, Pat Irving, did an extraordinary thing. On *Farmer* she suggested that chapter five should be chapter three and chapter three should be chapter five. So I switched it around and she was totally right. That's wonderful.

INTERVIEWER

Does your publisher, Seymour Lawrence, ever ask you to accept editorial advice?

HARRISON

No, he doesn't. But I might need some editing on this novel because I'm in a whole different area, and my editor who works with Sam Lawrence, Leslie Wells, is improbably alert and I would certainly listen to anything she had to say. But where this comes from, too, is the poem. Editors don't change poems.

INTERVIEWER

You've always seemed interested in form, and in experimenting with form.

HARRISON

I diagrammed the form of *Wolf* before I wrote it—just a picture of the form, no words. In *Farmer*, for example, I tell the reader how the book is going to end in the first two pages, then attempt to make the reader forget. It's similar to a Greek tale that people listen to two hundred times and still enjoy. The idea is that you make little suggestions, little parts to suggest a whole.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever have any formal training in music?

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HARRISON

No, but it was always very much of an interest. When I was in college, many of my friends were in music. That was pleasant because they taught me how to read scores, so when I was working as a farm laborer I could play Stravinsky's "Petrouchka" in my head. Stravinsky was a hero of mine. Now I'm planning to write an opera with the composer, Nicholas Thorne.

INTERVIEWER

Dancing frequently seems to have a place in your work.

HARRISON

When I was nineteen in New York I went to see dancing all the time. Up at Lewisohn Stadium, you could go for sixty cents and see Eric Bruhn or Eglevsky and the New York Ballet Company. I've always been fascinated by physical limitations. And I like it in the sense that kids dance before they're taught to. That's how the mind works. Part of it's from Yeats, who believed that the primary thing is to see life in terms of dance. To me, along with the river, the best metaphor is the dance. As Nordstrom said in "The Man Who Gave Up His Name," maybe swimming is dancing in the water. It's also a tantric motion, all those tantric Gods who are always dancing, they're always caught in a movement, no matter how ornate. They have a belt of snakes and a head of fire and seven eyes, and they're dancing. Those old myths keep coming up.

INTERVIEWER

One reviewer called *Sundog* "a novel teeming with ideas." How has your interest in philosophy influenced your work?

HARRISON

I think ideas are as real as trees. *Sundog* is actually a philosophical novel. I live around that structure although those ideas tend to emerge in my work as sort of irrational and metaphoric. What Bergson called *elan vital* interested me very early. You can see me as a fifteen year-old reading Kant's *Cri-*

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tique of Pure Reason, wondering why I didn't understand every bit of it. Then I went from Kant to Kierkegaard, to Bergson, to Nietzsche. Those questions started very early in my life, once I gave up temporarily on the Bible, though I still seem to write totally within a Christian framework in an odd way.

INTERVIEWER

In what way?

HARRISON

Well, I realized a couple of years ago that never has it occurred to me not to believe in God and Jesus, and all that. I never questioned it particularly. I was quite a Bible student, pored over and over it, both the Old and New Testament in the King James Version.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that your style has evolved or changed in any particular direction?

HARRISON

Well, I'm no longer interested in anyone getting fancy for the wrong reasons. I'm not interested in showing off anymore. I think what's important in style, which of course is someone's voice finally, is that you have a firm sense of the appropriate. There's a temptation to enter into rhetorical sections because they're fun to write. That's probably a problem William Styron has, particularly as he's so good at it. It was very difficult for me in "Legends of the Fall," the title story, to subdue that impulse, because I think I'm pretty good at it too when I cut loose, and I had to consciously subdue my more grandiose impulses.

INTERVIEWER

So sometimes you have to consciously hold a style in?

HARRISON

Absolutely, because you want the style, in that book espe-

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cially, to burst at the seams. One editor told me that if "Legends" was four hundred and fifty pages rather than one hundred pages, I could make a fortune. But the whole reason it works is that it's only a hundred pages. Tristan isn't Tristan if he's babbling. And the grandeur is in people's minds.

INTERVIEWER

Will this new book be longer than your others?

HARRISON

This will be the first time I've written a novel that's five hundred pages.

INTERVIEWER

Was it your intention from the beginning to try a longer work?

HARRISON

No, but this was a larger idea and I couldn't do it in less. And what I did again is I over-researched it. That seems to be a nervous habit I've been involved in recently.

INTERVIEWER

Do you dislike didacticism in literature?

HARRISON

I hate it. I can't use most of what I know but I think it should be there as a resonating board. You should read enough to know what's going on throughout the world. Poets should know the history of the United States and South America. Congressmen certainly don't know any of it. That's why we're down in Central America when we have no business there. They don't even know that those countries down there think of themselves as separate entities. They keep referring to "Central America." Well, try passing that off on the Panamanians, the Costa Ricans, the El Salvadorans. It's amazing to me, for instance, how few people know anything about nineteenth-century American history. They don't know what

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happened to the hundred civilizations represented by the American Indian. That's shocking. I'm dealing with that in this book. To me, the Indians are our curse on the house of Atreus. They're our doom. The way we killed them is also what's killing us now. Greed. Greed. It's totally an Old Testament notion but absolutely true. Greed is killing the soul-life of the nation. You can see it all around you. It's destroying what's left of our physical beauty, it's polluting the country, it's making us more Germanic and warlike and stupid.

INTERVIEWER

Does it ever discourage you that the artist can do so little to prevent this?

HARRISON

No, he's doing all he can by writing well.

INTERVIEWER

You have said that you thought it was dangerous for an artist to embrace causes.

HARRISON

I think it's terribly dangerous. I think Mailer's "The Steps of the Pentagon" was terrific, but I don't know if it was worth what he put into it. I liked better that little novella he wrote, *Why Are We In Vietnam?* which was exactly why we were in Vietnam. For my purposes, I believe what Kierkegaard said, that you have to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling before you can get on with anyone else's program.

INTERVIEWER

And yet the artistic sensibilities of many of the South American writers, for instance, are very much seasoned by the political climate.

HARRISON

There's a danger in our lush society that the artist won't be taken seriously. For people as a whole it's been a fabulous sys-

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tem, but it's shit on certain people and continues to do so. I asked a group recently—and they got very angry when I brought this up—to try to explain to me the difference between apartheid and the Indian reservation system as it's been maintained by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. As far as I'm concerned, there isn't any. I went around to a half-dozen reservations last year and if you think these Indians are any better off than the blacks in Soweto you're full of shit. Some people think we got their land fair and square because of the Dawes Act. Well sure, but none of those Indians had M.B.A.'s. Red Cloud had never been in a bank. Read Mari Sandoz's book on Crazy Horse. I visited the actual murder site and it was closed because of budget restrictions! I was the only one there. All the tourists were over in the Calvary horse barns, which I wanted to get a bunch of Sioux to invade and torch. Can't you see them—a thousand mounted Sioux—riding out of the hills to destroy Fort Robinson? I think that's a magnificent idea. I'd be glad to join up as a nickel-plated Indian for that one. That area of our history is just ugly, ugly. I know this lawyer who worked for nine years as a volunteer at Pine Ridge. One night about three A.M.—we were drinking—he took me downstairs. Way back in the corner was a safe, and in the safe was a little pouch that belonged to this old woman. In the pouch was a stone that Crazy Horse had given to her mother, and this guy showed it to me, and he let me touch it. It was such a strange thing. You know, when the Sioux were being driven hither and yon by the Army until Crazy Horse's daughter died of pneumonia, he lay next to her on a burial platform for three days and three nights. Am I supposed to think that Ronald Reagan is as interesting as Crazy Horse, when he's not? What does it serve us to take these people seriously and not listen to what Black Elk said? And of course there's a grandeur in that area so hopelessly lost. Think of being a Sioux and knowing that. I can't imagine anything more painful than being an American Indian, and I'm dealing with some of those issues in this book. It's a mystery to me how we could be so generous in defeat to the Japs and the Germans, and yet so neglect and disregard the Indians. When so many are starving to death, the

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BIA was spending an average of six thousand dollars a year per Indian. Why don't we simply give them six thousand dollars a year in a monthly allowance and then they wouldn't starve? They don't raise their voice in their own defense anymore because they have for over one hundred years and nobody payed any attention. Why should they continue trying to talk? A Sioux told me that one reason they get drunk, other than that they're alcoholics, is because it's the only insulting thing they have left to do to us. Our doom as a nation will be unveiled in the way we have treated the blacks and Indians, the entire Third World. Washington is a flunked Passion Play.

INTERVIEWER

You've never been afraid of poking fun at yourself in fiction, have you?

HARRISON

Who wants to read about another nifty guy at loose ends? There's not a lot of self-knowledge in those novels which are published by the hundreds.

INTERVIEWER

Are there any of your own novels that you like better than others?

HARRISON

I actually never think about it. I'm always interested when reviewers compare my current work unfavorably to work that they never reviewed at all, like *Farmer.*

INTERVIEWER

Do literary prizes mean anything to you—say, winning a Pulitzer Prize?

HARRISON

No, not really. Any kind of prize is pleasant—especially to your mom, your wife, and kids—but I never got one. After you've written novels or books of poetry for a long time, your

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concerns become very different. That's just what you do, you've given your entire life over to it, and luckily it's panned out to the point that they're printing your books. So as far as reputation goes, I'm not interested in any reputation that has to be sought. If there's anything more gruesome than Republican politics, it's literary politics.

INTERVIEWER

So you don't feel any pressure at this stage in your career to write the "Big Book"?

HARRISON

I feel absolutely no pressure of any kind. People don't realize how irrational and decadent an act of literature is in the first place, and to feel pressure in a literary sense is hopeless. I always think of an artist in terms of his best work, which I think is what he deserves. If he can do this, if he's taken the trouble, then this is what I think of him. The before and after is always there, but so what? He wrote well and nobody should wish to take it away from him. That's what people forget about James Jones, who wrote far and away the best war novel I can imagine. Why did they flog him senseless for the rest of his life? I always felt, strangely, a real kinship with Jones, whom I never met, being from the Midwest.

INTERVIEWER

They also did it to Steinbeck, particularly posthumously.

HARRISON

I think *The Grapes of Wrath* is a monstrously underrated novel, and Steinbeck has been neglected. But that's O.K., because he's Steinbeck and they're not. Where's their *Grapes of Wrath?* They didn't even write *The Grapes of Goofy*.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel any sense of competition with other writers?

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HARRISON

I don't know what that would be for. I can't see the art processes as being a sack race. I've thought that over as part of the idea that when people whom you love very much die, why would you get in a sack race over the novel? And I think sometimes that bitterness of competition leads people to write the wrong kind of novel, the kind of novel they wouldn't otherwise write. I think Keats is still right in that the most valuable thing for a writer to have is a negative capability.

INTERVIEWER

In what sense?

HARRISON

Just to be able to hold at bay hundreds of conflicting emotions and ideas. That's what makes good literature, whereas opinions don't, and the urge to be right is hopeless. Think of the kind of material Rilke dealt with all his life. It's stupefying. Did you read Stephen Mitchell's new translation of *The Sonnets to Orpheus?* You see that the depth of his art is so dissociated from what we think of as literary existence. Your best weapon is your vertigo.

INTERVIEWER

Is that a characteristic that might be somehow easier for a poet to cultivate than a novelist?

HARRISON

Why? Look at Knut Hamsun's novels, or the best of Isak Dinesen. The best of Faulkner. It had nothing to do with that fractionated, dry, cold cliquishness of any given period. As Thomas Wolfe pointed out writing about Greenwich Village in the thirties, at any given time the most highly-regarded artist in New York is very likely to be a puppeteer. That's always been true. In my formative years, when I was eighteen or nineteen, my religion was Joyce's *Finnegans Wake.* I wore out two copies. I was insane for that book. Now it seems to me that

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so much of the post-modernist movement is intensely worn out, looking to European models for emotions that Americans never get to have. For instance, I was looking at Kundera, who's not my kind of novelist but he's certainly a very good writer, and he's earned his feelings; he's been through the complete bifurcation, the destruction of his country. For someone at the Iowa Writer's Workshop to use him as a model is absurd. That's how wrung out they are when they're hoping to use a European model that has nothing whatsoever to do with any feeling they could possibly have for their own country. I remember something Yeats said, and I was going to use it as an epigraph for my novel: "What portion of the world can the artist have who has awakened from the common dream, nothing but dissipation and despair."

INTERVIEWER

You admire Márquez a great deal, don't you?

HARRISON

He's simply done things that no American novelist has shown himself capable of. Look at *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*—it's such a strong, juicy death, a death in primary colors. It's not a pastel death with a film of snot over it—chi-chi snot at that. It's right there. That's an aspect of Lorca's poetry I've always admired. I was in a snit the other day over the infantile mechanics of minimalism, the extreme posture of fatigue. Minimalism is that old cow, Naturalism, rendered into the smallest of print.

INTERVIEWER

Can you name some of the younger novelists you admire?

HARRISON

David Martin, who wrote *The Crying Heart Tattoo*. That's a fabulous book and so is Russell Banks' *Continental Drift*. James Welch, John Calvin Batchelor and Charles Baxter are also very good. I wish Barry Lopez would write novels.

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INTERVIEWER

Anybody else?

HARRISON

That's all I can think of right now. There's no sense in plugging one's friends because most of them don't need it anymore, frankly. What, am I supposed to give McGuane a plug? Of course you read your friends. In terms of sheer verbal wit and brilliance, I don't see anybody in our generation of his size.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any advice for younger writers?

HARRISON

Just start at page one and write like a son of a bitch. Be totally familiar with the entirety of the western literary tradition, and if you have any extra time, throw in the eastern. Because how can you write well unless you know what passes for the best in the last three or four hundred years? And don't neglect music. I suspect that music can contribute to it as much as anything else. Tend to keep distant from religious, political, and social obligations. And I would think that you shouldn't give up until it's plainly and totally impossible. Like the Dostoyevskian image—when you see the wall you're suppose to put your hands at your sides and run your head into it over and over again. And finally I would warn them that democracy doesn't apply to the arts. Such a small percentage of people get everything and all the rest get virtually nothing.

INTERVIEWER

Hemingway said something to the effect that the further along you go in writing, the more alone you become. Has that been your experience?

HARRISON

He was a marvelous writer but a bully, and bullies tend to

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become lonely souls. You're only as lonely as you want to be. Scott Fitzgerald said this very whiney thing, that in your forties friendship can't save you any more than love could in your thirties. That's preposterously stupid and self-serving. Many times, because of certain arguments, McGuane and I could have broken off our relationship, but we never did. We always overcame it one way or another, and have been corresponding weekly for twenty years.

INTERVIEWER

Many of your protagonists seem to be seeking escape from their lives. Joseph in *Farmer* laying his farm to rest. Nordstrom in "The Man Who Gave Up His Name" very deliberately disassembling his life. Lundgren in *Warlock* trying in his fatuous way to fill the vacuum. Is there some metaphor at work here through which the artist can then move on to something else himself?

HARRISON

I think part of that is a literary device. You don't want to catch the man on the job, you want to catch him quitting the job, because when he's on the job all he gets to do is work. You have to think of him as escaping into life rather than from it. Somebody gives you the most banal and demeaning life in the way of making a livelihood, and if you abandon that, you're escaping—well, you'd have to be a nut case not to abandon it. It's that whole notion that Strang has of meaningful work. If you're an intelligent human being and you don't have meaningful work, then you'd better find it because your death, in those spooky terms, is stalking you every day. What those characters have in common, I suspect, is that they all want more abundance—mental heat, experience, jubilance. As a young man, Henry Miller saved my neck by offering these qualities.

INTERVIEWER

And does that quest for abundance satisfy a similar need in the artist?

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HARRISON

The closest I've come to a perception of it keys off that prime metaphor of Neruda's—the interminable artichoke, the unfolding, a process which never stops. What people forget is that this is not a goal-oriented operation. The Buddhists say the path itself is the way. It's a matter of not stopping your perceptions and of the courage involved in following them. It's why you have to think of Rilke as the most courageous poet, and certainly Rimbaud, potentially, in terms of the sheer daring of his consciousness. But that's an interesting question, because to tell you the truth, I've never thought about it. What you've done is created these people who fascinate you, created them perhaps because they'll try to answer some questions that you deeply need to be answered. Frankly, a writer should be a hero of consciousness.

INTERVIEWER

Is there any sense of resolution for the writer at the end of a novel?

HARRISON

I don't think you get a resolution so much as you've expanded your universe. At any point as an artist, like the universe itself, if you're not expanding you're contracting. It's an integral part of the life process. There's no stability involved, nothing ever stops, so the biggest problem as an artist—and it's been a problem all my life—is that of vertigo; and that's probably the source of the drinking, because, being a sedative, alcohol stabilizes, though only on a temporary and somewhat destructive basis.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any problems with depression when you complete a book?

HARRISON

No, just exhaustion. The last time, I had to go to that clinic in Mexico because I was exhausted. I'm trying to avoid it this

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time by approaching it more rationally, but I don't think I'll be able to. I'll probably have to go back to the clinic, or if I can't afford it, to my cabin.

INTERVIEWER

Have you noticed your stamina decreasing as you get older?

HARRISON

Actually, it's increased over what it was ten years ago. I usually dance a half-hour a day to Mexican reggae music with fifteen-pound dumbells. I guess it's aerobic, and the weights keep your chest and arms in shape. You know that group Los Lobos? They go from ordinary rock music into this crazy border music which I love.

INTERVIEWER

Will it be difficult for you writing this new book through the winter months, a time when you've habitually had mental problems?

HARRISON

I think it will help me beat the rap. *Sundog* did it for me that one year because I wrote through that period, which was a conscious attempt to fight it. Then three weeks after I finished *Sundog* I went to Brazil. I defy anyone to be depressed on their first trip to Brazil. It's such a gorgeously strange place, and the music element is overwhelming. They were having an anti-nuclear march when I was there, holding up their signs while they marched to samba music. It was extraordinary. I stood there on the street corner with my hair standing on end. They said to me, "O.K. you fucking American, why you going to blow us all up? You going to blow us up before Carnival?" I said, "I'm sorry. I'm not doing it. I'm not even a senator." I was thinking that all the rest of the world is a victim of us and Russia.

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INTERVIEWER

Let me ask a question about where your passion for food and cooking enters into your life as an artist.

HARRISON

I think it's all one piece. When you bear down that hard on one thing—on your fiction or your poetry—then you have to have something like cooking, bird hunting or fishing that offers a commensurate and restorative joy. It comes from that notion that the way you eat bespeaks your entire attitude toward life. Consequently it can become obsessive, especially this time of year when Guy and Russell are here, because they're both such good cooks. And sometimes you can temporarily exhaust it, just as you can exhaust yourself with writing because you work so hard. For instance, in the last few years I've really tried to lighten up on this whole cooking thing when I'm at my cabin.

INTERVIEWER

Does the metaphor of dance translate to play?

HARRISON

I used to have second thoughts about my sporting life until my wife pointed out to me that where I really get into trouble is when I lose my sense of play. In one of Rilke's poems, he talks about this overdeveloped sense of heaviness that an artist acquires. It's what I put under the heading of "lugubrious masochism." You walk around and you feel like you're literally so heavy that you might fall through the crust of the earth. For this reason I've always been a fan of Peter Matthiessen's, in a peculiar, spiritual sense. He and Gary Snyder are writers who seem to live outside the whole framework of literary reputation and ambition. When I've run into them they seemed to have an air of being content with what they were doing that other writers don't have. Reputation is volatile and a writer will despair if he thinks he is, at any given time, a consensus of what the media thinks he is, because if the media's not think-

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ing about him at all then he disappears. Surely you need some encouragement as the years go by, but if you look too far outside yourself you're going to forget what the original dream was when you were nineteen.

INTERVIEWER

Can you really preserve that dream?

HARRISON

I think you can. You can preserve it by recreating the circumstances in which the dream was possible, which I can do at my cabin. If I couldn't recreate the dream, I would simply die. You asked about my eye injury—I'm sure that some of my need for isolation comes from that. I used to make a hole in the hay mow of the barn to hide out in. Maybe my cabin is my hay mow. I'm still writing from the hay mow.

INTERVIEWER

And what is that original dream?

HARRISON

Just of being an artist—in the old sense of the word. More a painterly notion of an artist, or a poet, than what we think of as a novelist. My first passion was to be a painter, but I was without talent.

INTERVIEWER

A question of maintaining a sense of purity?

HARRISON

Yes, the integrity of the total mission. It's a "calling" in religious terms. You feel called to be an artist, and the worst thing is the refusal of the call.

INTERVIEWER

It would seem that that almost childlike integrity is constantly assaulted in an artist's life, especially in this age. How can you maintain it?

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HARRISON

That's why you keep yourself apart. The reason I have my cabin is that it's easier to suffocate now in this culture than it's ever been, in terms of sheer, continuous bombardment, and you're not supposed to suffocate if you're an artist.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't there a danger of being too separate, too isolated?

HARRISON

Absolutely. What is it that Rilke said, and it's the truest thing I remember about being an artist? I think he said, "It's only in the rat race of the arena that the heart learns to beat."

INTERVIEWER

So it's necessary to enter into that world and then be able to get out of it unscathed?

HARRISON

Intact. It's the Zen metaphor of the ox, the ten stages of the ox, to finally have no fences and to be able to return to the city. The whole point is not to need any strictures and to still maintain balance and grace, and if you can't the danger is a life-and-death thing.

INTERVIEWER

Metaphorically as an artist, or literally?

HARRISON

Both. There are lots of ways of being killed. One of the main ways a person is killed as an artist is when he becomes mechanistic and repeats himself. Then he's dead. It's killed him as a human being and as an artist.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't that something that all artists must eventually face, as there is a limit to one's experiences and capabilities?

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HARRISON

There's a limit to one's resourcefulness, but how do you know the limit? You have to push out and not do anything you've ever done before. It comes to that. The notion of change in fiction is that a train has to stay on its tracks, and animals, even more than we, are creatures of specific habits, which is why, once you learn their habits, they are quite easy to hunt. But a man can stop his car, get out; he can dive in a lake and swim across, and then climb a tree. So don't tell me you can't change your fiction. Habit is what destroys art. I've always been struck by those Cheyenne who did everything backwards when they were bored. There's a longing, a craving to know more than we get to know, sort of a Faustian notion that you want a lot of interesting things to occur before you die; and it strikes you that rather than wait around for them to occur, you're going to have to arrange most of them.

INTERVIEWER

And your new novel pursues that longing?

HARRISON

I think you design something, whether it turns out that way or not, that's very nearly impossible in terms of your own talent and then you try to do it. Here's something I wrote this summer. I was characterizing my new novel, what I wanted the mood, the feeling of it to be: "A novel written from the cushioned silence, out of the water, the first light, twilight, the night sky, the farthest point in the forest, from the bottom of a lake, the bottom of a river, Northern Lights, from clouds, the loam, also the city at midnight, Los Angeles at dawn when the ocean seems less tired having slept in private, from the undisturbed prairie, from attics and root cellars, the girl in the thicket, the boy looking the wrong direction for the moon . . ." That's all.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that this *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit calendar that you have above your desk is sexist?

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HARRISON

Yes and no. However, as a tree hung with apples bespeaks God's plenty, so does that model. It's an old Protestant trick.

INTERVIEWER

What is this strange mobile hanging over the desk?

HARRISON

That's a crow's wing I found. This is a toy pig my daughter gave me because I like pigs. Then someone read *Letters to Yesenin* for the first time this year, thirteen years later, and sent me this anti-suicide button. Here's a grizzly turd Douglas Peacock sent—that was a hard one to figure out how to hang. That's a pine cone from the forest where Lorca was executed. A Haitian baby shoe—that was found on the beach after the Haitian boat lift. A beaver pelt . . .

INTERVIEWER

Those are talismans?

HARRISON

Yeah, they are, aren't they?

INTERVIEWER

And you have these little signs up on your bulletin board. "Mortality." "The Glass Coffin." "Reality."

HARRISON

Those are just little reminders. My wife put that "reality" sign up there when I was entering a depression. I never mentioned it, but it's her handwriting. And the glass coffin—I was dreaming that all these people were in glass coffins in a procession down the street and this brown person who looked like me but turned out to be my daughter went out and broke my glass coffin with a club and I popped out. She was bringing me awake to her difficulties and my own.

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INTERVIEWER

You have a ritualistic way of going about things, don't you?

HARRISON

It's a bit embarrassing, isn't it? One night in my cabin I saw a flash of light and thought somebody was entering my driveway. I was so angry that I jumped out of bed and hit my head on the iron chandelier. I heard this horrible howling and yowling and I smashed through the back door to look for the car, but it was just a lightning storm. I was covered with sweat and my nose was distended, and I had long teeth and there was hair all over me. Obviously a little attack of lycanthropy, see? My dog wouldn't speak to me for two days. Perhaps it was all the anger finally coming out of me because I'd heard a wolf down in the delta, and three days later I saw the wolf right on my two-track. Two days later, I dreamed I found the wolf on the road and her back was broken, and I hugged her and she went all the way into me, and I remember thinking humorously in the dream—God, I've been trying to lose weight all summer and now I have to carry this she-wolf around in my body. How can I ever hope to lose weight? But she didn't seem too heavy.

INTERVIEWER

In *Wolf*, Swanson was trying to see a wolf, and in *Farmer*, Joseph was trying to see a coyote. And in your own life you finally did see a wolf after many years of looking for one. What's the importance of that?

HARRISON

It's a shamanistic thing, a process that occurs in your dream life. It's very primitive because our brains are primitive in a Jungian sense. From the time I was a little boy I admired bears and wolves, and it became important for me to see one in the process of my life rather than going off and seeing one as a tourist. I know what we'll do. Grab your recorder and let's walk out here and see how many of the aspen hybrids I planted have survived . . . I'm going to get about five thousand of them and

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make a little woodcock covert right here, so I can have a singing woodcock in my backyard. Then I got this other idea, which is to fill up this whole pasture with planted and transplanted wildflowers, just keep planting them every year until this whole thing is a jungle of wildflowers and bushes. It's hard to think about but by the time I die, if I make it another twenty years, wouldn't it be wonderful to stand out here hidden from view in this big jungle of bushes and wildflowers? That's my idea of a nice thing.

—**Jim Fergus**

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Requiescat

John Hersey

The moment I hated most at Thurston's came toward the end of Winston Fief's tribute. I had tried to talk Margot out of having the service at Thurston's at all. Moose didn't belong in one of those fashionable horror shows at James W. Thurston's, "The Memorial Chapel," which are treated in the next day's *Times* like Met openings or muscular dystrophy balls at the Waldorf. Moose had given up on New York. He despised that crowd. I put it to Margot that services at Thurston's were like big parties publishers give for hot authors at Four Seasons—big winners and burnt-out cases scouting each other, new outfits on display, envy on the loose, nothing to do with a figure like Moose. Who would get the best pews? God, look at that hat of Cynthia's, has St. Laurent gone bonkers? That would be the level of the text. But Margot is Margot.

The room was Thurston's largest. The design of the pews and indeed the mode of the place as a whole were right enough for Moose—decorous, understated, New Englandish, more or less Congregational, almost in the spirit of the simple church he loved so much on Greenfield Hill. But you could count on Margot to have the last word. Her final affront to

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Moose was to smother him, where he lay in his brass-handled box—Margot had told me the casket was Thurston's four-thousand-dollar number—in gladiolas. Moose hated them. I remember once his calling them the Pekinese dogs of the gardening world. He said they literally nauseated him, and I believed him; it was part of Moose's make-up to have powerful somatic reactions to flowers, as he did to many other things—pets, colors, good and bad news, and the sight of a strange woman's bare shoulder. He spent half his life having goose pimples.

As I entered, about fifteen minutes early, I could see that the room was going to be packed to overflowing—a flock of fickle ego-trippers who had forgotten how cruelly they'd snubbed Moose back in the fifties, now suddenly titillated by his horrible death, all turning up: celebrities, jet-setters, writers, politicians, musicians, business types, and ex-radicals now wearing three-piece custom-made suits. A queer gazpacho. Having suffered my own loss so recently, I was feeling low anyway, and the sight of these people who thought this the best ticket in town that morning took me down a further notch.

Margot had given the Thurston's ushers a list, and they put me in the second pew on the left, right behind three of Moose's four wives, all in a row. Maria, poor thing, was absent in the death of her own choosing, but the three survivors were there, chatting away like catbirds, Margot impeccable as hostess to those other two bitches, as she refers to them. I felt hot. This was not good enough for Moose; with all his weaknesses, Moose was a serious man.

Margot had Grischa Wallenstein play the viola for a while, a stately Bach chaconne—just right to choose the deep-toned instrument that is usually subordinated, almost too big to tuck under the chin, and Grischa, on slight acquaintance, seemed to have understood Moose, because he made Bach sound somehow akin to Hawthorne and Melville and Dickinson. That would have been enough, just that music, with its strange controlled leaps from string to string, from constraint to constraint, but also from heartbeat to wild heartbeat.

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But then came the three so-called tributes, each worse than I could have feared: Eliot Fanton, sounding as if he were arguing a somehow distasteful civil-rights case before the Supreme Court; Philip Sieveringhaus, who hardly knew Moose at all but was "in" enough to suit Margot, reading a long boozy poem he'd probably torn off the night before, really an abstract thanatopsis rather than a remembrance of this dead man; and Winston Fief—I'll come to him. In all three performances I was reminded of the way Hazel, Moose's first wife, used to pay her husband fulsome and obviously insincere compliments—keeping him on a tight leash.

All three touched on Moose's courage, but as if it were beyond his command, demonic; on his having gone to prison for his beliefs, though under the surface admiration there were whiffs of a sick awe, as if there had been something really criminal, something that belonged in prison, in Moose; on his "vitality," his "magnetic energy," which everyone understood with a little mental snicker to mean his voracious pursuit of the skirt; and—archly—on the "senseless violence" of his death. All three, even the poet, used that very phrase. To me, the violence had made all too much sense. It was the native-as-apple-pie goal toward which Moose had been steering all his turbulent life long, the failed Puritan's final collision with the earthy reality he had always yearned for. I felt the same anger at those three men as I did at whoever had killed Moose in the first place.

Win Fief was all dressed in leather—open-necked shirt, jacket, and flaring trousers, enough cowhide against the skin to make a Buddhist pass out; at his neck a discrete little French sailor's scarf; Birkenstock sandals; hair style like Boy George's. He seemed to have had a dream of youth. About ten years younger than Moose and I, no youth he. I never could figure out what Moose saw in him, but he really liked Win. Win talked as much about himself, in his "tribute," as he did about Moose: "When I first met our friend, I had just finished the preliminary designs for the Cullinan building. . . ." But what really set me on edge was a complicated idea Win tried to develop about "origins and style," for in putting this passage to-

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gether Win's pretensions had got the best of him, and he missed Moose by a mile. For a gross example: "His was a world fundamentally Emersonian, Thoreauvian, Jamesian." Moose loathed Emerson, thought Thoreau self-righteous, admired James but felt light years distant from his fastidiousness. Grischa with his big deep fiddle had understood: Moose came from that other New England, the New England of the wild heartbeat. The culmination of this passage of Win's was the sentence that almost made me get up and walk out.

"He was your decent sort of WASP—no sting."

An architect should never be entrusted with words. A shallow conceit like that one was bad enough in itself, but beyond that it was a knowing falsehood. Moose was all sting. Winston Fief knew him. It had never occurred to me before to wonder whether Win was Jewish. I felt in the line a hint of that reciprocal face of anti-Semitism, the Jew's despising of the goy. That hostility, though, is usually relieved by, discharged through, wit, and Win's line was not only unwitty, it was witless. But it did have a lot of veiled malice in it, condescension, and even hatred. All from Moose's "friend." This was really why I had tried to argue Margot out of the affair at Thurston's, and why I had refused to speak myself: A stylish funeral service of that sort can't help giving license to subtle encodings of anger, and some not so subtle, and I knew that Moose alive had planted a great deal of that feeling, which dead he would harvest. Anyone as big as he was, literally and figuratively, comes in for his share of envy, resentment, sexual jealousy, and, above all, skepticism—especially where there has been a larger-than-life sense of honor in the makeup. Those negatives were richly embedded in the praise of the so-called tributes. All you had to do was listen with care.

It was worse outside on the bright sidewalk afterwards. People lingered. It was a dazzling May noontime, and the scene sparkled like a bottle of mixed hard candies in a sunny window. The maple trees on the cross street, which would be so drab in full leaf in a few weeks, were dressed now in their new lime leaves, shuffling wafer-thin slices of light in the gentle breeze. The gold-on-black lettering of the Thurston's legend

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running around above the first floor of the building was circumspectly consoling. Dark-suited attendants with pale averted faces, seeming to share some monstrous secret about the deceased, were carrying armfuls of gladiolas of all colors out the side entrance and were banking them in a sunlight-pricked black Cadillac pickup parked in front of the so-far empty hearse. The jerky movements of the women in their soft-colored clothes—who wants to look dreary at a funeral?—and their turning, searching glances suggested an irritable restlessness in the letdown of knowing that Moose's enormous sensuality, of which they had all been aware, even from great distances, was quelled now. I saw Cynthia Bigwood's gaze land like a perching bird on Fay Callender's pale green cashmere outfit, which must have been a Donna Karan. Fay Callender stared at the halter—Givenchy?—that made the most of Barclay Delavanty's creamy neck. Round and round the eyes kept flying, as if looking for a promise that time would break its rules now and stand still.

People were embarrassed to see me. I was in my rage. My wife Deborah was dead and buried. My best friend Moose was dead but not buried. I had to hang around, waiting for the motorcade that would carry him out to the country, to the shady plot Margot and I had chosen in Weston. When these people saw me looming, they would break off whatever they were chatting about and say, "Beautiful service," or, "Wasn't Win good?" or, "Dear Hugh, what a charmer old Moosey was."

The ride out to Weston seemed to me to take a month. The three wives rode in the first car, behind the pickup banked with glads. Did those three talk about Moose all the way? What might they have been saying to each other? I was stuck in the second limo, on a jump seat, of course. With me were Grischa Wallenstein, his pale girl Wanda Somethingski, Phil Sieveringhaus, and Phil's wife, the actress Pamela Brighton. When we got in, the great poet shoved his way into the back seat between the two women, and poor Grischa got the other jump seat, while behind him the poet applied his usual feelies to pale Wanda, who kept exclaiming in an East European accent. We went by way of the Merritt. The many dogwoods were

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stretching out their pretty paper hands to the sun. Sievering-haus kept asking the limo driver to pull out of line and go someplace to a bar, but the man pretended not to hear.

The graveside ceremony included some fine old language from *The Book of Common Prayer* of the sort Moose liked, and then they put him down, and we heard the thud of the first shovelful of dirt. Afterward there was a kind of cocktail party at Margot's and Moose's house—not a word about Moose that I could hear. I was driven back to town alone in one of the limousines.

And yes, the next morning I found the *Times* had had Emily Friller, the social reporter with the heavy ironic touch, cover the service, and she handled it—quite correctly—as a sign of the astonishing change in the culture since the early fifties.

I called Margot. "I hope you're satisfied," I said.

"It was beautiful," she said. "Artur came. Did you see that Lenny was there? I was so happy."

"Happy? That was a funeral. Remember? Moose died?"

"I was happy for him."

I half expected Margot to say that I had a few things to learn, that a memorial service isn't to remember the dead, it's to be glad that that person died and not you.

"I have to have a talk with you," I said.

Grief first struck me a hard blow in the chest when I walked into the Weston living room the next evening, and Margot was there in her red chair but Moose was *not* standing in front of the fireplace with one hand up on the mantel near his Old Grandad on the rocks, his weight on one hipsprung leg, his broad, mobile face working itself around an anecdote neither of us had heard before. In the grip of this vivid notness I think I saw him in memory as clearly as I ever had in the flesh.

First, the head. It bobbed and tucked with emphases, was lifted for an expectant pause. It was one of the great heads of all time. During the period when Moose was a frequent tenant of the gossip columns, his head was compared with those of John L. Lewis, Judge Learned Hand, Arturo Toscanini, Pablo Picasso, Wendell Willkie. When we think of such men, we

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speak of the lion, which, besides his huge mane, has a prodigious sack of stones between his hind legs, and indeed there was an open maleness and a hint of profligate raunchiness about all those men. There certainly was about Moose. There is no sensualist like a massive Puritan.

He moved like a big cat. I remember the first time I saw him running down under a pass on Baker Field at Hotchkiss. I was in the bleachers, exiled from sports by a heart murmur. (My flawed ticker out-ticked his.) In those days football players wore pliable leather helmets snug on the skull, and because of his enormous shoulder pads even his great head seemed proportionately small. He ran, made a head fake and a cut, looked back, and took the ball softly in his huge hands. Once I asked him if he had a sense of dancing as he went downfield for a pass, and he said, "No. It's all in the eyes. You have to narrow your field of vision. It's like looking through a tube. Rufus throws: all I can see is the ball coming into the other end of the tube. I just put my hands around the near end of the tube, and the ball comes into them."

All in the eyes. The shaggy brows—like a wingspread—remained black as his hair grayed. Under them the brown-irised eyes were disconcerting. When they narrowed their focus they projected, through his "tube," a laser-like beam that could set fire to things; at other times, the look in them went fuzzy, as if the pupils were dissolving, and then the eyes seemed scooped out and blackly hollow, and in the hollow place there was a chill like that in an ancient cistern.

How could a Puritan have such thick lips? Deep parenthetical lines ran down from the flanges of his nose to the sides of his mouth—they always had, even when he was a boy—so his broad and otherwise cheerful face always looked haunted.

His great hands flopped around like flags. They were broad, spatulate, and remarkably dry, as dry as papyrus. His right hand, as you gripped it in greeting, was a shock: limp, dead-fishy, veddy British. Many people, having once shaken hands with him, thought Moose Bradford cold and snooty, a New England snob to the fingertips. What they couldn't know, be-

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cause he never talked about it, was that three of the flexor muscles on the inside of his right forearm were snipped off clean by a ricocheting hunk of the Zero that kamikazied on the signal bridge of the *Hornet* the day she was sunk—on that mysterious day that cast a shadow over all the rest of his life.

So there he was, or rather wasn't, in front of the fireplace, just as powerful in absence as he had been in the flesh.

"What did you want to talk about, old Hugh?"

Moose had called me "old Hugh" ever since prep school, and I did not at all like Margot's appropriating that phrase. I said, "I want to write a piece about Moose."

Margot looked as if I'd insulted her; perhaps she thought I'd come—or should have come—to offer condolences, to comfort her in her bereavement, and it was not nice to talk about what I wanted to do.

"How can you write an article about such a close friend? No one will believe you."

"I know, but I'd like to try."

"My Lord, Hughie, have you come to interview me?"

"I want to try to understand some things," I said.

"But Hugh," she said, not one to waste any time putting on the old brass knuckles, "you wouldn't be able to be fair to him, after the way he fooled around with Deborah. Remember? That time? Forget it, Hughie. *Requiescat in pace.*"

Moose lived two lives. He aspired to sainthood and became a sybarite. "I married him," Margot said later that evening, "because he was so decent. He was the first really good man I ever met—the crowd we grew up with, God. Did you ever know any other lawyer who had the kind of integrity he had? Lawyers are trained to take either side, but you knew damn well, Hughie, with every case there was a side Moose wouldn't take no matter how much moola you offered him. But by the time I got him, you know, I found out—too late—the treads were worn off his tires. He'd had it. I don't mean he wasn't sexy, he was all too—but the edge was off the other business, his moral influence, whatever you want to call it. Hazel had the

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best of him. She had his best years. We talked about that in the limo on the way out to the graveyard. She got him when he came back from the war; he was so gutsy in those years. Poor Maria got him after he came out of prison, she found out that he cheated on her *once*, one time, and you know what happened to her. Then Carol—she was a little too good at cheating herself, huh? Then poor me, what?"

"Poor you," I said. "You kept your hooks in him longer than any of the rest of them."

"I was the only one who knew what he was made of."

"But you two fought all the time."

"He didn't know what he wanted, so he got mad with me when I agreed with him."

I went home that night in a fury at Margot. That was a very strange line of hers: "He didn't know what he wanted." I had always believed that he firmly wanted to do the right thing. Except, of course, where desire was concerned—though there, I suppose, he might have thought that the right thing, every time, is to help yourself. This was the side of him Margot had used to get under my skin, saying, "Remember? That time?"—the time when Moose had "fooled around" with my dear, dead Deborah, who, she seemed to be suggesting, was at that very moment frolicking on the Elysian Fields in the altogether with old stud Moosey. But I did not remember. I never knew that Moose had had a fling with Deb—if he had. "That time?" she'd said. I couldn't ask her: What time? But she must have known I'd spend a lot of effort asking myself that question, from then on.

Before I went to bed that night, I thought of my visit to Moose in the Federal pen at Attica, and I remembered he was waiting on the other side of the barrier as I sat down, and I was just trying to take in the unfamiliar bulk of him in a gray prison outfit that was much too tight for him—they must not have had anything his size—when he said, first thing, "How's that beautiful Deborah?" Was "that time" before that? After?

I lay awake far into the night trying to chase those questions out of my mind by thinking back to those days, thinking about why Moose had landed in prison in the first place. It was

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so hard to recapture the crazy hysteria of the first three months of that year. I tried to sort it out. The first thing was the Hiss sentence, must have been January. Then the Klaus Fuchs confession in London. Then McCarthy getting off that first insane speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, "I have here in my hand. . ." And then the case that mattered, of course, to Moose, since he'd represented three of them: the Supreme Court upholding the convictions of the eleven Communist leaders accused under the Smith Act. And then, as the moves came against Moose, barely noticeable in this more sensational context—the Judith Coplon conviction, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and Harry Gold and David Greenglass arrested for selling the Russians atom-bomb secrets, the *Amerasia* business, and McCarthy back at it with the first charges against Owen Lattimore. The House Un-American Activities Committee picked up on Moose ostensibly because he'd defended three Communists—ignoring the fact that he had always gone on the line for underdogs, no matter what their politics may have been. He got himself in trouble, I'd heard back then, because of his scrupulousness about telling the truth in the hearings he was called in for. He kept saying, "I can't remember precisely." Maybe he was afraid of being caught perjuring himself; he certainly didn't *want* to go to prison. He refused to take the Fifth because, he said, everyone thought that to do that was to confess guilt, and he knew he wasn't guilty of a damn thing. All of Moose's friends believed he'd managed pretty well, but HUAC trumped up a charge of contempt of Congress, and he was sentenced to three months, of which he served one. It wasn't long as prison terms go, but it made him famous, at least in New York, made him one of the heroes or one of the Commies, depending on where you came from. Even the "friends" who said they admired his guts kept away from him for months after that, just to be on the safe side.

As I pondered trying to write about all that, I had, more and more, an uneasy feeling that something was missing. His record was spotless. He'd never had anything to do—except as an attorney—with radicals. If you looked closely, he was conservative: a classic New Englander who would be

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very doubtful about hasty change of any kind and would certainly register to vote as an Independent. Even in those mad-dog days, with McCarthy and HUAC on the rampage, they weren't going around throwing many straight lawyers like Bradford into prison. I didn't get to sleep until nearly dawn.

As soon as I was dressed the next morning I went downtown and put in an application, under the Freedom of Information Act, for the Bradford file at the FBI.

The things I care about most are hardest for me to do, and in the weeks after that I kept putting off working on the Moose piece. Then one night at a dinner party I was seated beside Hazel, who according to Margot had "had the best years" of Moose. She's secure in a happy remarriage, these days, to a cheerful, fat, easy-going guy who follows the odd and evidently very profitable occupation of buying and selling diamonds. She was relaxed and generous as she talked about Moose, though I remembered that their divorce—she had brought it—had been messy. And what had made it so unpleasant was that she moved out on him just after he came under fire from HUAC, so that the gossips kept saying she'd found out something nasty about his political past.

"The lovely thing about Moose," she said now, "was that he seemed forever to be trying to figure out how to be an honorable person. It's not so easy, Hughie. He'd charge off in one direction and then another—and then there'd be these little selfishnesses. Self-serving lies. Or anyway inconsistencies. Did you ever play tennis with him?"

"I have a funny heart."

"Of course you do, I'm sorry. It was always 'Nice shot!'—'Beauty!'—never a quarrel about in or out. This behavior used to make some people really mad, they said he was so god-a'mighty Christian, so playing fields of Eton. Because, you see, they knew he was out to win. He really and truly wanted to win. He could put a dirty slice on the ball. But then with me, alone, he was never mean or competitive—a million surprises. Prankish, you know, suddenly at breakfast, 'God damn it, Hazel, why is this toast buttered on the wrong side?' "

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"Was it with you or with Maria that he moved out to the country?"

"God help us, it was me. Southport, don't you remember? You and Deborah were there. It was a divine house, but this was the kind of thing, Hugh: There was this meadow in back, it had been let go and was all grown up with underbrush, so there was nothing for it but Moose had to buy a tractor with a cutter bar. Hughie, he scared me, there was a kind of fury about the way he had to keep that meadow cleared with that horrible, dangerous slicing thing. His forebears stuck out all over him. I began to understand stone walls for the first time. The work! And such bleak work. And then, Hugh, he was time-bound. He looked at his watch a thousand times a day, every minute was important. This made for thrills, you know. This big hulk would see a dewy spider web on the grass, early in the morning, and you had to go out on the lawn in your bare feet and look at it with him at once, before it faded in the sun. But the clock thing also led to a feeling he was wasting time, not enjoying the minutes as much as he should have. And what was so quirky about all that urgency was that it somehow made him procrastinate to beat the band. He had endless lists of things to do and never did them. It drove me batty."

"What drove you to leave him? Was it the women?"

"For God's sake, Hugh," she said, suddenly sharp. "You were his best friend. Why don't you let sleeping dogs lie?"

Moose had talked a lot over the years about Vance Talbot, who had served with him on the *Hornet*, and I'd met Talbot several times; he's a broker, very rich and very Reaganish now. The two were Ninety-Day Wonders—among the crop of lieutenants (junior grade), mostly just out of Ivy League colleges and mostly from "good families," as people used to say who thought that they were in them, who'd been given a crash course at Quonset and then been sent out to do non-combat duty of various kinds on carriers. I called Talbot, and he invited me to have a drink with him at the Harvard Club.

There was a hard sheen of newness on his blue pinstripe suit. He told about the crucial day in a bored, singsong voice;

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it was a memorized tale, almost worn out by retellings. "The second two torpedoes—from torpedo planes, you understand—hit at almost the same time, aft, and put the ship dead in the water . . ." He must have known I wanted him to get to Moose, and he finally did. Three dive bombers crashed onto the ship, he said, one on a slant into one side of the signal bridge—Moose's general-quarters station. "It was fantastic that he wasn't killed, the other three fellows up there were all ground up like hamburgers." I was beginning to find Talbot's narrative offensive. He must have seen me squirm. For my part I could see that he was now enjoying himself. He dinged the table bell to order seconds on Old Fashioneds for both of us.

But suddenly something shifted inside Talbot. He said, "Did Moose ever tell you about his terror?"

"He would never talk about the *Hornet*."

"Well, old boy," he said, "this was very deep in him. I got it out of him that night, on the destroyer that fished us out of the water. I was in awe of the man, because I kept seeing him, all day—he'd attached himself to Gowan, the Exec, after the air department had left the ship, and he was toting Gowan's briefcase under the arm that had a big bloody first-aid bandage on it, and the two of them were all over the ship, you know. Jesus, the slaughter on the ranger deck was unbelievable, and truly scary fires, and the men in the engine room in a daze over their dead machinery—and these two were as cool and quiet as if they were checking in planes on a sunny day at air plot—words of encouragement, commands when they were needed, even bearing a hand on a bucket line or on the cable detail when that cruiser took us in tow. Moose being so big, this meant something. It helped gobs do what was expected of them. I was praising Moose for this stuff that night, and he looked at me like somebody who was on the moon and said that after the plane hit the signal deck, the next thing he knew he was two decks down, trying to open a sealed bulkhead door. He said—I remember he said—fear had struck him blind. So his total control after that, the ice in his veins, when he was tagging around with Gowan—those two chaps were the eye of the hurricane—was spooky."

All this was pronounced in those off-British north-shore-of-

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Long Island accents the Brearley and Spence girls used to use—people in the *Social Register.* So was Talbot's reading of the lesson, which was not mine, as I thought later about his story. "It came to me that old Moose was off his rocker, you know. It affected him. For years. How else could you explain that whole Commie involvement? Someone with his background?"

The sybarite betrayed the saint; I suspect the saint prevented the sybarite from having as much fun as he would have liked. I always thought of Moose's womanizing as a concomitant, paradoxical as it may seem, of his New England decency. Probity was in his genes; he came from a line of citizens who had served for two hundred years as preacher and teacher, as selectman, town counsel, village librarian, haywarden, fence viewer, town meeting moderator, sheep-mark recorder, trainband ensign. He was deeply programmed with an urge to do the proper thing, and he very often did it, even where women were concerned—he married four of them, after all—but in the belly of the urge, one had to guess, there was something that had come down from Jonathan Edwards: a predisposition to, almost a yearning for, the threat of awful heat, a need to feel that he hung like a spider on a delicate but very strong thread, spun from his own body, over the fires in the pit. I doubt if he ever articulated or even recognized this need, if indeed he had it, but it was the only way I could glue him into one piece in my mind. I went to see Carol, Moose's third wife—the one Margot dismissed as having strayed a bit too much herself—and she said two things that interested me. "Moose didn't have an ounce of cruelty in him," she said, "but he was very attractive to masochistic women." And when we got on the subject of his unfaithfulness, she said quite coolly that sex with him was fantastic just after she had reason to think he'd cheated on her. Maybe the paradox in Moose was not just a matter of sex but cut all the way through him: the good sport at tennis with a dirty slice. He hated the war that had plucked his eyes out for an hour, yet it seemed that there was a warrior still and always embedded in him, fighting to

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win at any cost. And I wondered: As an attorney, was he everlastingly drawn to the underdog for good reasons, and perhaps for some not so good?

These thoughts homed in on me about three months later, when the Freedom-of-Information papers came through. I felt guilty reading them. I had the sneaky feeling of peeking at someone else's mail. I had to laugh at the number of words and lines and even pages that had been blacked out on the basis of a presumed danger to national security. From our Moose? There were several accounts of interviews in which the men in dark suits had questioned "subject Bradford" over and over again on the associations leading to his defense of the Communists in court, and what fascinated me in them was the way the questioners repeatedly led Moose up to the edge of naming names, and the way Moose, obviously tempted, obviously knowing that had he done so the heat would have been withdrawn, firmly pulled back each time, *toward* the heat. But there were also passages that troubled me much more, when the men in dark suits would themselves name the names (most of them blotted out with black ink) and ask subject Bradford his opinion of the named, and here, I'm sorry to say, Moose didn't do so well. And here was where my sensation of peeking, of poking into a neighbor's garbage in search of some drab sign of his filth to hold against him, really began to bother me. Because I began to wonder whether I secretly wanted to dig up some dirt on my best friend, who was dead.

But I read on. It was all sickening because it was all so absurd. The agents' grammar was bad. They droned along—insistent unanswerable questions. Now and then Moose got angry, and you could see the prose of the agents' reports begin to tremble with a fantasy of this gigantic Communist, as they must have thought of him, suddenly charging at them with the chopping motions of martial arts. Mostly, though, the ritual was one of endless repetitions, circlings back, efforts to entrap Moose into fatal contradictions. Then, at last, buried in a long passage of humdrum miscellany, I found what I now realize that in my heart of hearts I may have yearned to find.

The sentence was written in the flat, affectless tone of all the

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rest. It simply said surveillance of Mildred Deming reported that at 23:15 p.m. on such-and-such date subject Bradford had checked in along with subject Deming at Moontop Motor Inn in Torcottville, Virginia; register showed "Mr. and Mrs. Winthrop Parsons." I was so riveted by the resonance of this name he had chosen that for some time I didn't realize the significance of the item. Then—Mildred Deming. Of course. I remembered. One of his possible associations during preparation of the defense of the Communists—one of the "known card carriers," as the men in dark suits kept calling them—that they had kept drumming at Moose about, over and over, only to meet repeated calm denials from him of ever having met this particular one.

I was deeply shocked by my realization of the importance of this buried item. For all those years I had been praising Moose to everyone for his integrity—for having had the courage to go to prison for his convictions—only to discover, now, that what had really put him in the noose with the F.B.I., and so of course with the Congressmen, was a "guilt by association" of the most sleazy sort, and his barefaced denials of it. A motel quickie. Moose had gone to prison for no better reason than that he had, in Margot's awful phrase, fooled around—this time (the moth drawn to the candle flame) with a doxy who happened to be a known card carrier.

That repulsive idea pushed me toward thoughts of Moose's death. The newspaper accounts of it had highlighted its irony. The irony that this famous lawyer, who had spent so much of his time on *pro bono publico* cases, who could have been far richer had he not defended so many adherents of unpopular causes, but also so many of the poor and so many of the sick, so many druggies and derelicts, so many of those lost in the murk of society's amnesia—the irony that this man should have been mugged to death on Madison Avenue at three o'clock in the morning by a little gang of those he seemed to have loved so much. The piece in the *Times* reported that a witness, a certain Morris Venabel, a short-order cook going home from his night shift at the Burgher's Burger at Madison

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and 73rd, had said that the victim, who was much larger than his three assailants, had first argued with them and then resisted. He had been stabbed just twice—in the back, as if to reinforce the irony. It had taken the witness ages to find a telephone at that hour, and by the time the police and an ambulance arrived, Bradford was dead on the sidewalk. I remember wondering, and then blaming myself for wondering, when I first read the report: Did Margot Bradford know where her husband had been at three o'clock that morning, before he started back to their pied-à-terre?

Walking down Madison on the way home from a dinner party a few nights after I read the F.B.I. report—it was nearly midnight, and there were not many people around—I felt jumpy and out of sorts. There had been some conversation about Moose at dinner, and Fay Callender, who hardly knew him, had gone on and on in a whining voice about what a good man he was. She had got on my nerves, and I had drunk too much red wine. Now, as I walked along, I suddenly found myself drafting in my mind an account of Moose's death for my piece. I visualized the scene. I would be the witness Venabel.

Here came this tall, well-built man, refreshed by what he'd been up to. Maybe a lone taxi would have gone uptown just then, and in the quick wash of its headlights I would see the gray suit, the arms swinging, the long lope of the pace. Then, as he reached a relatively dim stretch halfway between street lights, three men jumped out from the recess of the entrance to an antique store. They were ahead of him, they blocked his way. One of them had something black and shiny in his hand, which might have been a water pistol—or a Saturday night special. I couldn't hear the words, but all three of these people, who were dwarfed by the man they had stopped, were jabbering at once. The man held up his hand in a stopping signal, said something. In my imagination I now came closer. Was he telling them he was their friend? They hooted and made demands. I imagined that I saw, he must have seen, a new glint of steel.

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It was here, as I think back on it, that my reconstruction of the mugging began to go haywire. I thought I heard my best friend Moose lecturing the muggers in a loud voice now, telling them they should be ashamed of themselves, they were a disgrace to their class of people, and to their families. Did he realize, as he tried to save his own life, that he had summoned up for these hooligans the stern voice of all the generations, standing behind him, of upright men? Whether he did or not, that voice, which seemed to come to my ears as if from the pulpit, rattled me. I began to be terribly afraid. At first I had imagined that I was watching, that I was the the man Venabel. But now I was horrified to find that I might be, in my imagination, one of the three attackers. He was lecturing *me*. Perhaps I had a weapon in my hand, I certainly had one in my mind. I imagined that I was shouting along with the other two. I could hear my voice crack as I asked, "When was 'that time' with Deb? Come on, Moose old cock, tell me, you'd better tell me." I didn't want to hurt him—Moose, Moose, my best and only friend—but I felt that I might not be able to control what my hand might do. I was seared by the heat of my own anger. He denied and denied. What "time" was I talking about? There was no such "time". This was all some fiction of Margot's. I shouted that he was a liar, a liar . . .

When I got home, I poured myself a drink, and gradually I calmed down. I don't know what o'clock it was when I went to my desk, gathered all the notes I'd made on the Moose piece and took them into the kitchen and dropped them into the refuse chute, from which there was no possibility of recovery.

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Four Poems by John Ash

Methodical Sonatas

As if encarmined tulips opened
with a sudden pop like that of a toy pistol
morning surprises you again,
and the new griefs already seem the old griefs
and they must move over, shift seats
in this mismanaged theatre of a life
so that the fresh pain may be installed
like a blade of glass next to the wrists.

The page no longer lies flat, it blinks and rises.
The words assume green or yellow vestments,
and officiously obstruct the way forward
like secretaries in some bland outer-office,
refusing to remember your name:
you are invisible again
as if standing at a bar in England.

A sudden shock or surge, an overload,
something as simple as a snowfall
on the grid of civilised barbarity,
and you can't even retrieve the name
of the flower nodding on the sill,—

it is somewhere in the lost, tenth chapter
of the two volume novel about the catastrophe of
  modernity,—
our divorce from everything prior to the invention
of the gramophone.

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Evening is coming on like a wave
and the hatches have not been secured.
The past leaks in and the ship goes down.
The rescue attempts are conducted under
rapidly advancing banks of purple cloud.

It's true you can get used to anything,
even dawn at sunset, but surely
something should be done to revise the programme
and patch up the hole in the sky? Sadly
the lamentations sound routine and promises
to do better in the future had best be discounted,
since this *is* the future and we are living it
second by second, breathlessly, in the hope
of some connection between notes.

"I am sorry I could not come to your assistance,
but I was in danger of drowning as well,
and the shattered glass rained about my head,
so I write this letter to you,—you who are dead—
and drop it into the loud surf amid which
I clearly see your attentive ear lying like a shell."

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Weekends in West Connecticut

It is a place of enormous trees
and a million stridulant insects.
At the center of so much counterpoint
sleep is impossible, and the garden is crushed
into something like a pill the night will swallow.

Of course the light still loiters in the streets,
and the houses with their varied porches are charming
as musical boxes filled with *Ruckert lieder*,
but what is it causes this putative mayor of Westport
and his wife to decorate their master-bedroom
with crude, agricultural implements?
It looks like a torture chamber . . . Outside,

blue spruces, red oaks, white pines all loom,
and the undergrowth's lush and tangled as mandarin prose.
You imagine boundless forests but the way is barred
a short way in at the outer precincts of another shrine
to domesticity, glowing through mutinous leaves,
and the sun, forgotten token, drops somewhere out of sight.

Nothing is held in common here:
corporations build their headquarters beside
absurd, idyllic mill ponds, and the city towers,
the open lands are driven away,
ever further over the unglimpsable horizon.
Confused by so much opulence and uniformity
it would be easy to forget the way out,
easy to forget that such a thing was needed.

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A land without horizon or sunset is a safe place,—
safe as the bedroom of your childhood
with its yellow walls and deceiving pictures
of friendly grown-ups and loquacious animals,
but when the last bricks of these walls have crumbled,
when the last shreds of those images have been blown
into the ocean, you are left alone in the muggy garden
with the irritable cat, amid a swarm of cries.

You hold in your hand a guide to
Swedish Folk Art in America.

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My Egypt

The street is a horn the wind blows through,—
a ram's horn, a car's horn, a French horn,
but its melody, though plangent, may not be
the one you want to hear right now.

The river tows its dreams,
consigned to the dim edge of existence,
reciting dull epics to desolate piers.
Many, you included, are still abed
but already the avenues are crowded
with people like flags of more nations
than exist in the world. It is all
a pageant of some kind, though anxious
and colder than of late.

The last tropical rainstorms visit us.
It is a day in September full of whispers of anticipation.
It is a time of greetings like farewells and farewells like
greetings.
For a depressing moment things seem foreordained,
entered in the prophetic ledger like age and
decreptitude,—
the thought of white hair and rising snowbanks,
burdened trees breaking with a crack.

Book of summer we have read you,
every word, and memorized the lines we need.
The colours turn. A single tree is purple, green and red,
and we begin to wonder if something really spectacular
will happen, like the installation on an endless
Von Sternberg staircase of the Emperor or Empress
of these events. We also wonder *how* it can happen
in times when the remarkable is expected, as the sun
is expected to rise, and even this seems to happen in
memory,—

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memory which is endlessly revised
to suit the present image, to which the past
leads us by means of a strict gothic perspective.
How to account therefrom for your continual dreams
of the future which thrill and frighten you
like bombs dropping on the city of your birth?
A department store where, perhaps, your first pyjamas
were purchased goes up in flames, and the surviving streets
are black with a kind of joyful malice that is soon erased.

What are these flurries? Of snow? These heaps
of stuff, soiled or destined to melt? Mush of potsherds?
Glass of a mosaic? They are discarded in time like shoes or
old books.

The seasons are like a day stretched over a year,
impossible to grasp, but we will be changed
at the turning of the year, changed for the better.

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Smoke

It was late in the year
and forests were burning a long way off
the day the smoke arrived, almost unperceived.
It came as a ghost, as many ghosts,
visible in the mouths of tunnels.

Now that your neighbor is dead,
you recall casual greetings on the stairs,
snatches of show-tunes in corridors,
and you look down into that well,—

the well of uncertain light and air, and see an absence
which neither snow nor corrosive rain effaces,
and the absence returns your glance, it follows like a cur
extending its tongue of smoke towards your hand.

The smoke enters the lamplight and the bed.
The eyes are clouded, the eyes are abolished,
and the ears that drank in the old arias of desire.
Venice is diminished and Rome,

their bells dulled, their restaurants emptied;
in Manhattan the towers shrink from the sky;
all places and all scenes become the less observed,
the less heard, the less loved.

In a city of burnt throats there can never be
enough sweet water to start the songs
and if you would dance, you must dance to the memory
of that lighted window the dusk carried off

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those hands preparing the evening meal,
skeletal hands fumbling among
the bottles of useless prophylactics,
those limbs and mouths, smoke we daily breathe.

But don't vanish, don't take the path to the river.
It is cold there and lonely,
and the sky is a burnt page. Stay—

you and you others. If we are not to become
a dispersed people of smoke
the *monument that is us* must be built soon.

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Andrew Hudgins

Mostly My Nightmares are Dull

Mostly my nightmares are dull. My ex-wife yells
and I yell back. The cat bolts out the door
and bites the neighbor's child. Or else
I'm raking the yard. Leaves fall faster, faster.
They swamp my ankles, rise up past my knees,
waist, neck—until I'm drowning in dry leaves.
All bourgeois nightmares, sure. But still
I wake up sweaty, short of breath, surprised
at just how little fear it takes to break me.
And worse, some nights I raise the dead. Mom says
it's fine I didn't visit her more often.
I didn't understand that you were dying,
I say. But she just waves my guilt away,
left-handed, as though it were tobacco smoke.
Then Grandmother forgives my vulgar mouth,
and Sister, dead before my birth, confides
that she too loves Ray Charles. Soon Grandma's talk
of niggers makes me snarl at her. My snarls
make her sulk and her sulking makes me yell.
Mom cries. My sister lapses back into her silence.
I wake up, they die again, and I walk out
into a day I'll live as carelessly
as if I'll only—fat chance—live it once.

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Two Poems by Tom Sleigh

Vows

The cracked creekbed sang with heat that afternoon.
My eyes scoured the brush for shed snakeskin
When far off the dazed whistle of a train
Woke in me your sighing
In the close bedroom where I watched your chest
Heave, swilling the dead air.
Your wedding photograph
Stared stiff-faced from the dresser
As immaculate in your tight black shoes
And vest, your youth havoced with the worn face
That was Grandfather. Dawnlight
Razoring through cracks in the shutters
Chattered on your false-teeth gleaming in a jar . . .

How unreal to know you those fifty years ago,
Your shambling red-faced innocence as you waltzed
Her round the yard, her hard
Unpractised kiss smearing lipstick on your cheek
As you drove off waving from the stovepipe-black Ford
That racketed and jolted across the rutted prairie,
The tin cans strung from the axle
Dolefully clattering, your dusty trail hovering
And drifting in the glare . . . Was it you,
Grandfather, sweet-talking and vigorous,
Your barrel-chested glamor
Swelling your pinched black suit, the swagger
Of your tenor upstaging her thin soprano
As you 'raised Cain' at the socials,
Your whooping, blear-eyed bravado
Outfacing her cool stare? Through trembling veils
Of heat I see you take her hand,

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Your bluff face peering intently across the plain,
The junipers' long shadows
Weaving among the guests gravely listening
To the vows on your dry halting lips.
The rich brown ooze of White Woman Creek
Gasps and sighs behind you in the sun lazily exploding
Above heat-tranced fields of grain, the air's
Cloud-piled acres
Tumbling and billowing . . .

Grandfather, antiquated harvester,
How you chortled and choked
As you chugged the burlap jug, then snaked
Your noon cigar around my head,
Claiming 'like the devil' to blow smoke
From your foxed pupils. I drank in
Your bourbon breath as you sat me in your lap
And plowed down the rasping stubble,
The dust-drenched umbrella louring above our heads,
Our brilliant red bandanas
Pulled up to our eyes
As we swatted and swatted the butting flies . . .
Toiling and faithful as the old John Deere,
How you endured, your fire-tongued
Credo, 'Plow straight, plow straight' hissing
And scorching like a love-word in my ear . . . I see you
Tranced and hieratic in your dust-stung goggles,
Looming above the tractor fouled
In fuming clouds of oil, the motor mumbling
And snorting as you gouge the fallow soil,
The harrow-disks glinting through fresh-turned loam,
The seed drilled
Into steaming, stretchmarked ground. . .

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Grandfather, like a heatwave you shimmer
At the edge of thought, a breath, a world
Away, your absences that come so near
Rekindling the withered junipers, the whirl
Of locusts that wheezing dawn
When glazed with fever and morphine
You turned from the flowers
Perjuring the stench of your gangrene
And met that pared down grin,
Its deadpan glare
Grimacing at the dust-motes that swirled
Like screens sheltering your pain. Betraying
Your labored breath, I nodded reassurance
Until you waved me off, eyes straining
From the sockets as you saw through me
To your death: After an hour's
Delirious mumbling about
'That hailed-out section north of town,'
You gummed an awful thumbs-down grin, Beechnut
Staining brown your chin
As you spat in the rust-eaten coffee can
And shrugged back, eyes open, to your pillow.

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The Last Word

As if your half-witted tongue
Spoke with an eloquence
Death bestows, I heard your voice
Muffled through the dark
Layers of cemetery loam:

"They found me black-suited
In the shuttered half-dark, my eyes
Dug like claws into the clouds'
Soft feather-turnings. What kept me
Separate the broiling sun

Of intellect now shone on fiercely:
In the sheep-pens stinking
Of dung and lanolin,
I buried my face in the ewe's
Swollen side and listened

For the lamb the way
The night sky listens
To the synapse-fire
Of meteors, the fibrillating
Heartbeat of the stars.

I heard the cells crackle
Into being, the embryonic
Brain begin to burn:
Hunger. Thirst. Beneath my ear
My own disastrous birthing,

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The umbilicus strangling
Like a whip around my neck,
Shoved through the momentary
Breach memory tore open—
Dying revealed to me my birth,

How half my brain went dark
As if one side of a universe
Were pinched out like a candle:
Just smart enough to sense
My difference, yet not know why—

Even my death was the thrust
Of a bewildering punchline: On Thanksgiving
Morning mouthwatering
Pain shoved like a spit
From my bowels to my brain."

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Wole Soyinka

Your Logic Frightens Me Mandela

Your logic frightens me, Mandela,
Your logic frightens me. Those years
Of dreams, of time accelerated in
Visionary hopes, of savouring the task anew,
The call, the tempo primed
To burst in supernovae round a "brave new world"!
Then stillness. Silence. The world closes round
Your sole reality; the rest is . . . dreams?

Your logic frightens me.
How coldly you disdain legerdemains!
"Open Sesame" and—two decades' rust on hinges
Peels at touch of a conjurer's wand?
White magic, ivory-topped black magic wand,
One moment wand, one moment riot club
Electric cattle prod and club or sjambok
Tearing flesh and spilling blood and brain?

This bag of tricks, whose silk streamers
Turn knotted cords to crush dark temples?
A rabbit punch sneaked beneath the rabbit?
Doves metamorphosed in milk-white talons?
Not for you the olive branch that sprouts
Gun muzzles, barbed-wire garlands, tangled thorns
To wreathe the brows of black, unwilling christs.

Your patience grows inhuman, Mandela.
Do you grow food? Do you make friends
Of mice and lizards? Measure the growth of grass
For time's unhurried pace?
Are you now the crossword puzzle expert?

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Chess? Ah, no! Subversion lurks among
Chess pieces. Structured clash of black and white,
Equal ranged and paced? An equal board? No!
Not on Robben Island. Checkers? Bad to worse.
That game has no respect for class or king-serf
Ordered universe. So, scrabble?

Monopoly? Now, that. . . .! You know
The game's modalities, so do they.
Come collection time, the cards read "White Only"
In the Community Chest. Like a gambler's coin
Both sides heads or tails, the 'Chance' cards read:
GO TO GAOL. GO STRAIGHT TO GAOL. DO NOT PASS 'GO'.
DO NOT COLLECT A HUNDREDTH RAND. Fishes feast,
I think, on those who sought to by-pass 'GO'
On Robben Island.

Your logic frightens me Mandela, your logic
Humbles me. Do you tame geckos?
Do grasshoppers break your silences?
Bats' radar pips pinpoint your statuesque
Gaze transcending distances at will?

Do moths break wing
Against a light-bulb's fitful glow
That brings no searing illumination?
Your sight shifts from moth to bulb,
Rests on its pulse-glow fluctuations—
Are kin feelings roused by a broken arc
Of tungsten trapped in vacuum?

Your pulse, I know, has slowed with earth's
Phlegmatic turns. I know your blood
Sagely warms and cools with seasons,
Responds to the lightest breeze
Yet scorns to race with winds (or hurricanes)
That threaten change on tortoise pads.

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Is our world light-years away, Mandela?
Lost in visions of that dare supreme
Against a dire supremacy of race,
What brings you back to earth? The night-guard's
Inhuman tramp? A sodden eye transgressing through
The Judas hole? Tell me Mandela,
That guard, is he *your* prisoner?

Your bounty threatens me, Mandela, that taut
Drum-skin of your heart on which our millions
Dance. I fear we latch, fat leeches
On your veins. Our daily imprecisions
Dull keen edges of your will.

Compromises deplete your act's repletion –
Feeding will-voided stomachs of a continent,
What will be left of you, Mandela?

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Wild Horses

Rick Bass

Karen was twenty-six. She had been engaged twice, married once. Her husband had run away with another woman after only six months. It still made her angry when she thought about it, which was not often.

The second man she had loved more, the most. He was the one she had been engaged to, but had not married. His name was Henry. He had drowned in the Mississippi the day before they were to be married. They never even found the body. He had a marker in the cemetery, but it was a sham. All her life, Karen had heard those stories about fiancés dying the day before the wedding: and then it had happened to her.

Henry and some of his friends, including his best friend, Sydney Bean, had been sitting up on the old railroad trestle, the old highway that ran so far and across that river, above the wide muddiness. Louisiana, and trees, on one side; Mississippi, and trees, and some farms, on the other side—the place from which they had come. There had been a full moon and no wind, and they had been sitting above the water, maybe a hundred feet above it, laughing, and drinking Psychos from the Daiquiri World over in Delta, Louisiana. The Psychos con-

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tained rum and Coca-Cola and various fruit juices and blue food coloring. They came in styrofoam cups the size of small trash cans, so large they had to be held with both hands. They had had too many of them: two, maybe three apiece.

Henry had stood up, beaten his chest like Tarzan, shouted, and then dived in. It had taken him forever, just to hit the water; the light from the moon was good, and they had been able to watch him, all the way down.

Sometimes Sydney Bean still came by to visit Karen. Sydney was gentle and sad, her own age, and he worked somewhere on a farm, out past Utica, back to the east, where he broke and sometimes trained horses.

Once a month—at the end of each month—Sydney would stay over on Karen's farm, and they would go into her big empty closet, and he would let her hit him: striking him with her fists, kicking him, kneeing him, slapping his face until his ears rang and his nose bled; slapping and swinging at him until she was crying and her hair was wild and in her eyes, and the palms of her hands hurt too much to hit him any more.

It built up, the ache and the anger in Karen; and then, hitting Sydney, it went away for a while. He was a good friend. But the trouble was that it always came back.

Sometimes Sydney would try to help her in other ways. He would tell her that some day she was going to have to realize that Henry would not be coming back. Not ever: not in any form, but to remember what she had had, to keep *that* from going away.

He would stand there, in the closet, and let her strike him. But the rules were strict: she had to keep her mouth closed. He would not let her call him names while she was hitting him.

Though she wanted to.

After it was over, and she was crying, more drained than she had felt since the last time, sobbing, her feelings laid bare, he would help her up. He would take her into the bedroom and towel her forehead with a cool washcloth. She would be crying in a child's gulping sobs, and he would brush her hair, hold

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her hands, even hold her against him, and pat her back while she moaned.

Farm sounds would come from the field, and when she looked out the window, she might see her neighbor, old Dr. Lynly, the vet, driving along in his ancient blue truck, moving along the bayou, down along the trees, with his dog, Buster, running alongside, barking; herding the cows together for vaccinations.

"I can still feel the hurt," Karen would tell Sydney sometimes, when Sydney came over, not to be beaten up, but to cook supper for her, or to just sit on the back porch with her, and to watch the fields.

Sydney would nod whenever Karen said that she still hurt, and he would study his hands.

"I could have grabbed him," he'd say, and then look up and out at the field some more. "I keep thinking that one of these years, I'm going to get a second chance." Sydney would shake his head again. "I think I could have grabbed him," he'd say.

"Or you could have dived in after him," Karen would say, hopefully, wistfully. "Maybe you could have dived in after him."

Her voice would trail off, and her face would be flat and weary.

On these occasions, Sydney Bean wanted the beatings to come once a week, or even daily. But they hurt, too, almost as much as the loss of his friend, and he said nothing. He still felt as if he owed Henry something. He didn't know what.

Sometimes, when he was down on his knees, and Karen was kicking him or elbowing him, he felt close to it—and he almost felt angry at Karen—but he could never catch the shape of it, only the feeling.

He wanted to know what was owed, so he could go on.

On his own farm, there were cattle, down in the fields, and they would get lost, separated from one another, and would low all through the night. It was a sound like soft thunder in the night, before the rain comes, and he liked it.

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He raised the cattle, and trained horses too: he saddle-broke the young ones that had never been ridden before, the one- and two-year-olds, the stallions, the wild mares. That pounding, and the evil, four-footed stamp-and-spin they went into when they could not shake him; when they began to do that, he knew he had them beaten. He charged $250 a horse, and sometimes it took him a month.

Old Dr. Lynly needed a helper, but couldn't pay much, and Sydney, who had done some business with the vet, helped Karen get the job. She needed something to do besides sitting around on her back porch, waiting for the end of each month.

Dr. Lynly was older than Karen had thought he would be, when she met him up close. He had that look to him that told her it might be the last year of his life. It wasn't so much any illness or feebleness or disability. It was just a finished look.

He and Buster—an Airedale, six years old—lived within the city limits of Vicksburg, down below the battlefield, hidden in one of the ravines—his house was up on blocks, the yard flooded with almost every rain—and in his yard, in various corrals and pens, were chickens, ducks, goats, sheep, ponies, horses, cows, and an ostrich. It was illegal to keep them as pets, and the city newspaper editor was after him to get rid of them, but Dr. Lynly claimed they were all being treated by his tiny clinic.

"You're keeping these animals too long, Doc," the editor told him. Dr. Lynly would pretend to be senile, and would pretend to think the editor was asking for a prescription, and would begin quoting various and random chemical names.

Buster minded Dr. Lynly exquisitely. The Airedale brought the paper, the slippers, he left the room on command, and he brought the chicken's eggs, daily, into the kitchen, making several trips for his and Dr. Lynly's breakfast. Dr. Lynly would have six eggs, fried for himself, and Buster would get a dozen or so, broken into his bowl raw. Any extras went into the refrigerator for Dr. Lynly to take on his rounds, though he no longer had many; only the very oldest people, who remem-

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bered him, and the very poorest, who knew he worked for free. They knew he would charge them only for the medicine.

Buster's coat was glossy from the eggs, and burnished, black and tan. His eyes, deep in the curls, were bright, sometimes like the brightest things in the world. He watched Dr. Lynly all the time.

Sometimes Karen watched Dr. Lynly play with Buster, bending down and swatting him in the chest, slapping his shoulders. She had thought it would be mostly kittens and lambs. Mostly, though, he told her, it would be the horses.

The strongest creatures were the ones that got the sickest, and their pain was unspeakable when they finally did yield to it. On the rounds with Dr. Lynly, Karen forgot to think about Henry at all. Though she was horrified by the pain, and almost wished it were hers, bearing it rather than watching it, when the horses suffered.

Once, when Sydney was with her, he had reached out and taken her hand in his. When she looked down and saw it, she had at first been puzzled, not recognizing what it was, and then repulsed, as if it were a giant slug. She threw Sydney's hand off hers quickly, and ran into her room.

Sydney stayed out on the porch. It was heavy blue twilight and all the cattle down in the fields were feeding.

"I'm sorry," he called out. "But I can't bring him back!" He waited for her to answer, but could only hear her sobs. It had been three years, he thought.

He knew he was wrong to have caught her off-balance like that: but he was tired of her unhappiness, and frustrated that he could do nothing to end it. The sounds of her crying carried, and the cows down in the fields began to move closer, with interest. The light had dimmed, there were only dark shadows and pale lights, and a low gold thumbnail of a moon came up over the ragged tear of trees by the bayou.

The beauty of the evening, being on Karen's porch and in her life, when it should have been Henry, flooded Sydney with

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a sudden guilt. He had been fighting it, and holding it back, constantly: and then, suddenly, the quietness of the evening, and the stillness, released it.

He heard himself saying a crazy thing.

"I pushed him off, you know," he said, loudly enough so she could hear. "I finished my drink, and put both hands on his skinny-ass little shoulders, and said, 'Take a deep breath, Henry.' I just pushed him off," said Sydney.

It felt good, making up the lie. He was surprised at the relief he felt; it was as if he had control of the situation. It was like when he was on the horses, breaking them, trying to stay on.

Presently, Karen came back out with a small blue pistol, a .38, and she went down the steps and out to where he was standing, and she put it next to his head.

"Let's get in the truck," she said.

He knew where they were going.

The river was about ten miles away, and they drove slowly. There was fog flowing across the low parts of the road and through the fields and meadows like smoke, coming from the woods, and he was thinking about how cold and hard the water would be when he finally hit.

He felt as if he were already falling towards it, the way it had taken Henry forever to fall. But he didn't say anything, and though it didn't feel right, he wondered if perhaps it was this simple, as if this were what was owed, after all.

They drove on, past the blue fields and the great spills of fog. The roofs of the hay barns were bright silver polished tin, under the little moon and stars. There were small lakes, cattle stock tanks, and steam rose from them.

They drove with the windows down; it was a hot night, full of flying bugs, and about two miles from the river, Karen told him to stop.

He pulled off to the side of the road, and wondered what she was going to do with his body. A cattle egret flew by, ghostly white and large, flying slowly, and Sydney was amazed that he had never recognized their beauty before, though he

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had seen millions. It flew right across their windshield, from across the road, and it startled both of them.

The radiator ticked.

"You didn't really push him off, did you?" Karen asked. She still had the pistol against his head, and had switched hands.

Like frost burning off the grass in a bright morning sun, there was in his mind a sudden, sugary, watery feeling—like something dissolving. She was not going to kill him after all.

"No," he said.

"But you could have saved him," she said, for the thousandth time.

"I could have reached out and grabbed him," Sydney agreed. He was going to live. He was going to get to keep feeling things, was going to get to keep seeing things.

He kept his hands in his lap, not wanting to alarm Karen, but his eyes moved all around as he looked for more egrets. He was eager to see another one.

Karen watched him for a while, still holding the pistol against him, and then turned it around and looked at the open barrel of it, cross-eyed, and held it there, right in her face, for several seconds. Then she reached out and put it in the glove box.

Sydney Bean was shuddering.

"Thank you," he said.

He put his head down on the steering wheel, in the moonlight. There were crickets calling all around them. They sat like that for a long time, Sydney leaning against the wheel, and Karen sitting up straight, just looking out at the fields.

Then the cattle began to move up the hill towards them, thinking that Karen's old truck was the one that had come to feed them, and slowly, drifting up the hill from all over the fields, coming from out of the woods, and from their nearby resting spots on the sandbars along the little dry creek that ran down into the bayou—eventually, the cattle all assembled around the truck, like schoolchildren.

They stood there in the moonlight, some with white faces

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like skulls, all about the same size, and chewed grass and watched the truck. One, bolder than the rest—a yearling black Angus—moved in close, bumped the grill of the truck with his nose, playing, and then leapt back again, scattering some of the others.

"How much would you say that one weighs?" Karen asked. "How much, Sydney?"

They drove the last two miles to the river slowly. It was about four A.M. The yearling cow was bleating and trying to break free; Sydney had tied him up with his belt, and with jumper cables and shoelaces, and an old shirt. His lip was bloody from where the calf had butted him.

But he had wrestled larger steers than that before.

They parked at the old bridge, the one across which the trains still ran. Farther downriver, they could see an occasional car, two round spots of headlight moving slowly and steadily across the new bridge, so far above the river, going very slowly. Sydney put his shoulders under the calf's belly and lifted it, with his back and legs, and like a prisoner in the stock, he carried it out to the center of the bridge. Karen followed. It took about fifteen minutes to get there, and Sydney was trembling, dripping with sweat, when finally they gauged they had reached the middle. The deepest part.

They sat there, soothing the frightened calf, stroking its ears, patting its flanks, and waited for the sun to come up. When it did, pale orange behind the great steaminess of the trees and river below—the fog from the river and trees a gunmetal gray, the whole world washed in gray flatness, except for the fruit of the sun—they untied the calf, and pushed him over.

They watched him forever and forever, a black object and then a black spot against the great background of no-colored river, and then there was a tiny white splash, lost almost immediately in the river's current. Logs, which looked like twigs from up on the bridge, swept across the spot. Everything headed south, moving south, and there were no eddies, no pauses.

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"I am halfway over him," Karen said.

And then, walking back, she said: "So that was really what it was like?"

She had a good appetite, and they stopped at the Waffle House and ate eggs and pancakes, and had sausage and biscuits and bacon and orange juice. She excused herself to go to the restroom, and when she came back out, her face was washed, her hair brushed and clean-looking. Sydney paid for the meal, and when they stepped outside, the morning was growing hot.

"I have to work today," Karen said, when they got back to her house. "We have to go see about a mule."

"Me, too," said Sydney. "I've got a stallion who thinks he's a *bad-ass*."

She studied him for a second, and felt like telling him to be careful, but didn't. Something was in her, a thing like hope stirring, and she felt guilty for it.

Sydney whistled, driving home, and tapped his hands on the steering wheel, though the radio did not work.

Dr. Lynly and Karen drove until the truck wouldn't go any farther, bogged down in the clay, and then they got out and walked. It was cool beneath all the big trees, and the forest seemed to be trying to press in on them. Dr. Lynly carried his heavy bag, stopping and switching arms frequently. Buster trotted slightly ahead, between the two of them, looking left and right, and up the road, and even up into the tops of the trees.

There was a sawmill, deep in the woods, where the delta's farmland in the northern part of the county settled at the river, and then went into dark mystery; hardwoods, and muddy roads, then no roads. The men at the sawmill used mules to drag their trees to the cutting. There had never been money for bulldozers, or even tractors. The woods were quiet, and foreboding; it seemed to be a place without sound or light.

When they got near the sawmill, they could hear the sound

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of axes. Four men, shirtless, in muddy boots with the laces undone, were working on the biggest tree Karen had ever seen. It was a tree too big for chain saws. Had any of the men owned one, the tree would have ruined the saw.

One of the men kept swinging at the tree: putting his back into it, with rhythmic, stroking cuts. The other three stepped back, hitched their pants, and wiped their faces with their forearms.

The fourth man stopped cutting finally. There was no fat on him and he was pale, even standing in the beam of sunlight that was coming down through an opening in the trees, and he looked old—fifty, maybe, or sixty. Some of his fingers were missing.

"The mule'll be back in a minute," he said. He wasn't even breathing hard. "He's gone to bring a load up out of the bottom." He pointed with his ax, down into the swamp.

"We'll just wait," said Dr. Lynly. He bent back and tried to look up at the top of the trees. "Y'all just go right ahead with your cutting."

But the pale muscled man was already swinging again, and the other three, with another tug at their beltless pants, joined in: an odd, pausing drumbeat, as four successive whacks hit the tree; then four more again; and then, almost immediately, the cadence stretching out, growing irregular, as the older man chopped faster.

All around them were the soft pittings, like hail, of tree chips raining into the bushes. One of the chips hit Buster in the nose, and he rubbed it with his paw, and turned and looked up at Dr. Lynly.

They heard the mule before they saw him: he was groaning, like a person. He was coming up the hill that led out of the swamp; he was coming towards them.

They could see the tops of small trees and saplings shaking as he dragged his load through them. Then they could see the tops of his ears; then his huge head, and after that they saw his chest. Veins raced against the chestnut thickness of it.

Then the tops of his legs.

Then his knee. Karen stared at it before starting to tremble.

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She sat down in the mud, and hugged herself—the men stopped swinging, for just a moment—and Dr. Lynly had to help her up.

It was the mule's right knee that was injured, and it had swollen to the size of a basketball. It buckled, with every step he took, pulling the sled up the slick and muddy hill, but he kept his footing and he did not stop. Flies buzzed around the knee, around the infections, where the loggers had pierced the skin with nails and the ends of their knives, trying to drain the pus. Dried blood ran down in streaks to the mule's hoof, to the mud.

The sawlogs on the back of the sled smelled good, fresh. They smelled like they were still alive.

Dr. Lynly walked over to the mule and touched the knee. The mule closed his eyes and trembled slightly, as Karen had done, or even as if in ecstasy, at the chance to rest. The three other men, plus the sledder, gathered around.

"We can't stop workin' him," the sledder said. "We can't shoot him, either. We've got to keep him alive. He's all we've got. If he dies, it's us that'll have to pull them logs up here."

A cedar moth, from the woods, passed over the mule's ears, fluttering blindly. It rested on the mule's forehead briefly, and then flew off. The mule did not open his eyes. Dr. Lynly frowned and rubbed his chin. Karen felt faint again, and leaned against the mule's sweaty back to keep from falling.

"You sure you've got to keep working him?" Dr. Lynly asked.

"Yes, sir."

The pale logger was still swinging: tiny chips flying in batches.

Dr. Lynly opened his bag. He took out a needle and rag, and a bottle of alcohol. He cleaned the mule's infections. The mule drooled a little when the needle went in, but did not open his eyes. The needle was slender, and it bent and flexed, and slowly Dr. Lynly drained the fluid.

Karen held onto the mule's wet back and vomited into the mud: both her hands on the mule as if she were being arrested against the hood of a car, and her feet spread out wide. The men gripped their axes awkwardly.

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Dr. Lynly gave one of them a large plastic jug of pills.

"These will kill his pain," he said. "The knee will get big again, though. I'll be back out, to drain it again." He handed Karen a clean rag from his satchel, and led her away from the mule, away from the mess.

One of the ax men carried Dr. Lynly's satchel all the way back to the truck. Dr. Lynly let Karen get up into the truck first, and then Buster; then the ax man rocked and shoved, pushing on the hood of the truck as the tires spun, and helped them back it out of the mud—their payment, for healing the mule. A smell of burning rubber and smoke hung in the trees after they left.

They didn't talk much. Dr. Lynly was thinking about the pain killers: how for a moment, he had almost given the death pills instead.

Karen was thinking how she would not let him pay her for that day's work. Also she was thinking about Sydney Bean: she would sit on the porch with him again, and maybe drink a beer and watch the fields.

He was sitting on the back porch, when she got in; he was on the wooden bench next to the hammock, and he had a tray set up for her with a pitcher of cold orange juice. There was froth in the pitcher, a light creamy foaminess from where he had been stirring it, and the ice cubes were circling around. Beads of condensation slid down the pitcher, rolling slowly, then quickly, like tears. She could feel her heart giving. The field was rich summer green, and then, past the field, the dark line of trees. A long string of cattle egrets flew past, headed down to their rookery in the swamp.

Sydney poured her a small glass of orange juice. He had a metal pail of cold water and a clean washcloth. It was hot on the back porch, even for evening. He helped her get into the hammock; then he wrung the washcloth out and put it across her forehead, her eyes. Sydney smelled as if he had just gotten out of the shower, and he was wearing clean white duckcloth pants and a bright blue shirt.

She felt dizzy, and leaned back in the hammock. The washcloth over her eyes felt so good. She sipped the orange juice,

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not looking at it, and licked the light foam of it from her lips. Owls were beginning to call, down in the swamp.

She felt as if she were younger, going back to a place, some place she had not been in a long time but could remember fondly. It felt like she was in love. She knew that she could not be, but that was what it felt like.

Sydney sat behind her, and rubbed her temples.

It grew dark, and the moon came up.

"It was a rough day," she said, around ten o'clock.

But he just kept rubbing.

Around eleven o'clock, she dozed off, and he woke her, helped her from the hammock, and led her inside, not turning on any lights, and helped her get in bed.

Then he went back outside, locking the door behind him. He sat on the porch a little longer, watching the moon so high above him, and then he drove home, slowly, cautiously, as ever. Accidents were everywhere; they could happen at any time, from any direction.

He moved carefully, and tried to look ahead and be ready for the next one.

He really wanted her. He wanted her in his life. Sydney didn't know if the guilt was there for that—the wanting—or because he was alive, still seeing things, still feeling. He wanted someone in his life, and it didn't seem right to feel guilty about it. But he did.

Sometimes, at night, he would hear the horses running, thundering across the hard summer-baked flatness of his pasture, running wild—and he would imagine they were laughing at him for wasting his time feeling guilty, but it was a feeling he could not shake, could not ride down, and his sleep was often poor and restless.

Sydney often wondered if horses were even meant to be ridden at all.

It was always such a struggle.

The thing about the broncs, he realized—and he never realized it until they were rolling on top of him in the dust, or rubbing him off against a tree, or against the side of a barn, trying to break his leg—was that if the horses didn't get bro-

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ken, tamed, they'd get wilder. There was nothing as wild as a horse that had never been broken. It just got meaner, each day.

So he held on. He bucked and spun and arched and twisted, shooting up and down with the mad horse's leaps; and when the horse tried to hurt itself, by running straight into something—a fence, a barn, the lake—he stayed on.

If there was, once in a blue moon, a horse not only stronger, but more stubborn than he—then he would have to destroy it.

The cattle were easy to work with, they would do anything for food, and once one did it, they would all follow; but working with the horses made him think ahead, and sometimes he wondered, in streaks and bits of paranoia, if perhaps all the horses in the world did not have some battle against him, and were destined, all of them, to pass through his corrals, each one testing him before he was allowed to stop.

Because like all bronc-busters, that was what he someday allowed himself to consider and savor, in moments of rest: the day when he could stop. A run of successes. A string of wins so satisfying and continuous that it would seem—even though he would be sore, and tired—that a horse would never beat him again, and he would be convinced of it, and then he could quit.

Mornings in summers past, Henry used to come over and sit on the railing and watch. He had been an elementary school teacher, and frail, almost anemic; but he had loved to watch Sydney Bean ride the horses. He taught only a few classes in the summers, and he would sip coffee and grade a few papers while Sydney and the horse fought out in the center.

Sometimes Henry had to set a broken bone for Sydney—Sydney had shown him how—and other times Sydney, if he was alone, would set his own bones, if he even bothered with them. Then he would wrap them up and keep riding. Dr. Lynly had set some of his bones, on the bad breaks.

Sydney was feeling old, since Henry had drowned. Not so much in the mornings, when everything was new and cool,

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and had promise; but in the evenings, he could feel the crooked shapes of his bones, within him. He would drink beers, and watch his horses, and other people's horses in his pasture, as they ran. The horses never seemed to feel old, not even in the evenings, and he was jealous of them, of their strength.

He called Karen one weekend. "Come out and watch me break horses," he said.

He was feeling particularly sore and tired. For some reason he wanted her to see that he could always do it; that the horses were always broken. He wanted her to see what it looked like, and how it always turned out.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, after she had considered it. "I'm just so *tired*." It was a bad and crooked road, bumpy, from her house to his, and it took nearly an hour to drive it.

"I'll come get you. . . ?" he said. He wanted to shake her. But he said nothing; he nodded, and then remembered he was on the phone and said, "I understand."

She did let him sit on the porch with her, whenever he drove over to her farm. She had to have someone.

"Do you want to hit me?" he asked one evening, almost hopefully.

But she just shook her head sadly.

He saw that she was getting comfortable with her sorrow, was settling down into it, like an old way of life, and he wanted to shock her out of it, but felt paralyzed and mute, like the dumbest of animals.

He stared at his crooked hands, with the scars from the cuts made over the years by the fencing tools. Silently, he cursed all the many things he did not know. He could lift bales of hay. He could string barbed-wire fences. He could lift things. That was all he knew. He wished he were a chemist, an electrician, a poet, or a preacher. The things he had—what little of them there were—wouldn't help her.

She had never thought to ask how drunk Henry had been. Sydney thought that made a difference: whether you jumped

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off the bridge with one beer in you, or two, or a six-pack; or with a sea of purple Psychos rolling around in your stomach—but she never asked.

He admired her confidence, and doubted his ability to be as strong, as stubborn. She never considered that it might have been her fault, or Henry's; that some little spat might have prompted it, or general disillusionment.

It was his fault, Sydney's, square and simple, and she seemed comfortable, if not happy, with the fact.

Dr. Lynly treated horses, but he did not seem to love them, thought Karen.

"Stupid creatures," he would grumble, when they would not do as he wanted, when he was trying to doctor them. "Utter idiots." He and Buster and Karen would try to herd the horse into the trailer, or the corral, pulling on the reins and swatting the horse with green branches.

"Brickheads," Dr. Lynly would growl, pulling the reins, and then walking around and slapping, feebly, the horse's flank. "Brickheads and fatheads." He had been loading horses for fifty years, and Karen would giggle, because the horse's stupidity always seemed to surprise, and then anger Dr. Lynly, and she thought it was sweet.

It was as if he had not yet really learned that that was how they always were.

But she had seen that right away. She knew that a lot of girls, and women, were infatuated with horses, in love with them even, for their great size and strength, and for their wildness—but Karen, as she saw more and more of the sick horses, the ailing ones—the ones most people did not see regularly—knew that all horses were dumb, simple and trusting, and that even the smartest ones could be made to do as they were told.

And they could be so dumb, so loyal, and so oblivious to pain. It was as if—even if they could feel it—they could never, ever acknowledge it.

It was sweet, she thought, and dumb.

Karen let Sydney rub her temples and brush her hair. She

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would go into the bathroom, and wash it while he sat on the porch. He had taken up whittling; one of the stallions had broken Sydney's leg by throwing him into a fence and then trampling him, and the leg was in a heavy cast. So Sydney had decided to take a break for a few days.

He had bought a whittling kit at the hardware store, and was going to try hard to learn how to do it. There were instructions. The kit had a square, light piece of balsa wood, almost the weight of nothing, and a plain curved whittling knife. There was a dotted outline in the shape of a duck's head on the balsa wood that showed what the shape of his finished work would be.

After he learned to whittle, Sydney wanted to learn to play the harmonica. That was next, after whittling.

He would hear the water running, and hear Karen splashing, as she put her head under the faucet and rinsed.

She would come out in her robe, drying her hair, and then would let him sit in the hammock with her and brush her hair. It was September, and the cottonwoods were tinging, were making the skies hazy, soft and frozen. Nothing seemed to move.

Her hair came down to the middle of her back. She had stopped cutting it. The robe was old and worn, the color of an old blue dish. Something about the shampoo she used reminded him of apples. She wore moccasins that had a shearling lining in them, and Sydney and Karen would rock in the hammock, slightly. Sometimes Karen would get up and bring out two Cokes from the refrigerator, and they would drink those.

"Be sure to clean up those shavings when you go," she told him. There were little balsa wood curls all over the porch. Her hair, almost dry, would be light and soft. "Be sure not to leave a mess when you go," she would say.

It would be dark then, Venus out beyond them.

"Yes," he said.

Before he left, she reached out from the hammock, and caught his hand. She squeezed it, and then let go.

He drove home slowly, thinking of Henry, and of how he had once taken Henry fishing for the first time. They had

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caught a catfish so large that it had scared Henry. They drank beers, and sat in the boat, and talked.

One of Sydney Bean's headlights faltered, on the drive home, then went out, and it took him an hour and a half to get home.

A girl who raised Arabian stallions and mares and who lived out of town called Dr. Lynly in a panic. A mare named Jadar, her favorite, was bloating: rolling on her back out in the pasture, as big as an elephant. Her legs were waving at the sky. She was bloody from where she had been throwing herself against trees: trying to rub off the pain. Karen and Dr. Lynly drove hard and fast out to the girl's farm—Kathy's—taking corners sharply, running red lights; when they got to the farm, they flew over the cattle guard, and out across the bumps in the pasture, out to where Kathy was squatting not too far from her horse, crying, watching from a slight distance. Jadar continued to scream and writhe on her back, trying to shake the pain. They could see her stomach swelling, growing as if without reason, and with not much room left to stretch.

"Worms," said Dr. Lynly. He squatted down next to Kathy. She was crying even harder.

"Do something," she cried. She clutched his arm, and tugged in it. "Stob her with the trochar!"

Dr. Lynly looked ready to cry himself. The horse was growing, as if being filled with air by a hose.

"Child, I can't do that. I'm too old, and if I miss, I kill her. I could hit anything, in there: the spleen, the liver, the intestines; you can't stob a horse, the way you can a sheep or cow. We're better off with the pistol." Dr. Lynly's pistol was a big one, and Karen had never seen him use it before.

The horse continued to spin on its back, with violent screams. It didn't even look like a horse: there wasn't a patch of hide left on her, just raw, abused flesh, with bits of bark and gravel sticking to it everywhere.

"All right," he said, changing his mind. "Karen, get the trochar." He rolled up his sleeves, and stood up. He looked at the berserk horse as if he were about to go off to war for several

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years, as if he might not come back. Karen ran and got the stainless steel pipe that they used for piercing animals with more than one stomach, but never on horses. The trochar was razor sharp, honed, and bladed like a shovel on the end.

Dr. Lynly took the tool from Karen and crept in closer to the horse. Buster whined, and started to go with him—all four of Jadar's hooves were flying out, jabbing, trying to hit something—and then Dr. Lynly saw his opening, and moved in, and struck the trochar into the big horse's stomach.

They were sickened at how deep it went in.

It went in all the way.

The horse stiffened, and stopped moving.

The trochar was hollow, and all of the stomach's wormy contents, gasses and everything, were supposed to shoot up through the hollow part and out into the air. But nothing happened.

"She's gonna die, Doc," Kathy said. The horse was breathing heavily, her huge inflated sides rising and falling, but otherwise, there was no movement. Dr. Lynly stepped closer to the horse again and jiggled the t-handle of the trochar, just a little.

The gas hissed up the pipe and out into the wind. It steamed, it was so warm. The horse's eyes bulged, and then she rolled up to her knees, stood, and then trotted off, up the hill, where she immediately began grazing, with the trochar still hanging out of her side.

They stared, amazed, and could hear the ripping, crunching sounds of her grazing. The trochar looked like a toy.

"You are God," said Kathy.

Dr. Lynly watched the horse, trying not to be amazed himself. "Sometimes it works," he said. He gave Kathy a can of spray to put on the wound, to keep it from getting infected.

The days got cold and brittle. It was hard, working with the horses: Sydney's leg hurt all the time. Sometimes the horse would leap, and come down with all four hooves bunched in close together, and the pain and shock of it would travel all the way up Sydney's leg and into his shoulder, and down into his wrists: the break was in his ankle.

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He was sleeping past sun-up, some days, and was being thrown, now, nearly every day; sometimes several times in the same day.

There was always a strong wind. Rains began to blow in. It was cool, getting cold, crisp as apples, and it was the weather that in the summer everyone said they would be looking forward to. One night there was a frost, and a full moon.

On her back porch, sitting in the hammock by herself with a heavy blanket around her, Karen saw a stray balsa shaving caught between the cracks of her porch floor. It was white, in the moonlight—the whole porch was—and the field was blue—the cattle stood out in the moonlight like blue statues—and she almost called Sydney.

She even went as far as to get up and call information, to find out his number; it was that close.

But then the silence and absence of a thing—she presumed it was Henry, but did not know for sure, what it was—closed in around her, and the field beyond her porch, like the inside of her heart, seemed to be deathly still—and she did not call.

She thought, angrily, I can love who I want to love. But she was angry at Sydney Bean, for having tried to pull her so far out, into a place where she did not want to go.

She fell asleep in the hammock, and dreamed that Dr. Lynly was trying to wake her up, and was taking her blood pressure, feeling her forehead, and, craziest of all, swatting at her with green branches.

She awoke from the dream, and decided to call Sydney after all. He answered the phone as if he, too, had been awake.

"Hello?" he said. She could tell by the true questioning in his voice that he did not get many phone calls.

"Hello," said Karen. "I just—wanted to call, and tell you hello." She paused; almost a falter. "And that I feel better. That I feel good, I mean. That's all."

"Well," said Sydney Bean. "Well, good. I mean, great."

"That's all," said Karen. "Bye," she said.

"Goodbye," said Sydney.

On Thanksgiving Day, Karen and Dr. Lynly headed back out to the swamp to check up on the loggers' mule. It was the

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hardest cold of the year, and there was bright ice on the bridges, and it was not thawing, not even in the sun. The inside of Dr. Lynly's old truck was no warmer than the air outside. Buster, in his wooliness, lay across Karen to keep her warm.

They turned onto a gravel road, and started down into the swamp. Smoke, low and spreading, was all in the woods, like a fog. The men had little fires going all throughout the woods; they were each working on a different tree, and had small warming fires where they stood and shivered when resting.

Karen found herself looking for the pale ugly logger.

He was swinging the ax, but he only had one arm, he was swinging at the tree with one arm. The left arm was gone, and there was a sort of sleeve over it, like a sock. The man was sweating, and a small boy stepped up and quickly toweled him dry each time the pale man stepped back to take a rest.

They stopped the truck and got out and walked up to him, and he stepped back—wet, already, again; the boy toweled him off, standing on a low stool and starting with the man's neck and shoulders, and then going down the great back—and the man told them that the mule was better but that if they wanted to see him, he was lower in the swamp.

They followed the little path towards the river. All around them were downed trees, and stumps, and stacks of logs, but the woods looked no different. The haze from the fires made it seem colder. Acorns popped under their feet.

About halfway down the road, they met the mule. He was coming back up towards them, and he was pulling a good load. A small boy was in front of him, holding out a carrot, only partially eaten. The mule's knee looked much better, though it was still a little swollen, and probably always would be.

The boy stopped, and let the mule take another bite of carrot, making him lean far forward in the trace. His great rubbery lips stretched and quavered, and then flapped, as he tried to get it, and then there was the crunch when he did.

They could smell the carrot as the mule ground it with his old teeth. It was a wild carrot, dug from the woods, and not very big, but it smelled good.

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Karen had brought an apple and some sugar cubes, and she started forward to give them to the mule, but instead handed them to the little boy, who ate the sugar cubes himself, and put the apple in his pocket.

The mule was wearing an old straw hat, and looked casual, out of place. The boy switched him, and the mule shut his eyes and started up—his chest swelled, tight and sweaty, to fit the dark soft stained leather harness, and the big load behind him started in motion.

Buster whined, as the mule went by.

It was spring again, then, the month in which Henry had left them, and they were on the back porch. Karen had purchased a Clydesdale yearling, a great and huge animal, whose mane and fur she had shaved to keep it cool in the warming weather, and she had asked a little boy from a nearby farm with time on his hands to train it, in the afternoons. The horse was already gentled, but needed to be stronger. She was having the boy walk him around in the fields, pulling a makeshift sled of stones and tree stumps and old rotten bales of hay.

In the fall, when the Clydesdale was strong enough, she and Dr. Lynly were going to trailer it out to the swamp, and trade it for the mule.

Sydney Bean's leg had healed, been broken again, and was now healing once more. The stallion he was trying to break was showing signs of weakening. There was something in the whites of his eyes, Sydney thought, when he reared up, and he was not slamming himself into the barn—so it seemed to Sydney, anyway—with quite as much anger. Sydney thought that perhaps this coming summer would be the one in which he broke all of his horses, day after day, week after week.

They sat in the hammock and drank Cokes and nibbled radishes, celery, which Karen had washed and put on a little tray. They watched the boy, or one of his friends, his blue shirt a tiny spot against the treeline, as he followed the big dark form of the Clydesdale. The sky was a wide spread of crimson, all along the western trees, towards the river. They couldn't tell which of the local children it was, behind the big horse; it could have been any of them.

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"I really miss him," said Sydney Bean. "I really hurt."

"I know," Karen said. She put her hand on Sydney's, and rested it there. "I will help you," she said.

Out in the field, a few cattle egrets fluttered and hopped behind the horse and boy. The great young draft horse lifted his thick legs high and free of the mud with each step, free from the mud made soft by the rains of spring, and slowly—they could tell—he was skidding the sled forward.

The egrets hopped and danced, following at a slight distance, but neither the boy nor the horse seemed to notice. They kept their heads down, and moved forward.

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Philip Levine

A Walk with Tom Jefferson

3 SEASONS

Between the freeway
and the gray
conning towers
of the ballpark
miles of mostly
vacant lots, once
a neighborhood
of small two-storey
wooden houses--
dwellings for immigrants
from Ireland, Germany
Poland, West Virginia,
~~the Ukraine~~, Detroit, Toledo, Akron,
Cincinnati,
Lebanon, Syria,
Mexico, Dodge Main,
Chevy Gear & Axle,
Albania,
Sweets and Sweets
Plumbing,
Mavi-Nu-Icy
Bottling, Cambodia,
A little world
with only three seasons,
(or so we ~~said, some years back~~)
one to get tired,
one to get old,
one to die in;
No one puts in irises
and yet before March
~~has~~ passes
the hard green blades
~~have~~ pushed
their way through
where firm lawns
once were, the trunks
of beech and locust
darkened, the light new branches
~~took~~ the air,
you ~~could~~ can
smell the sticky sap
rising in the maples,
smell it
even over the wet
stink of burned houses.
~~Not all of them are gone.~~
On this block
seven houses are still there
to be counted
and if you count
the shacks

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A manuscript page from Philip Levine's poem "A Walk with Tom Jefferson." The poem first appeared in Paris Review 104.

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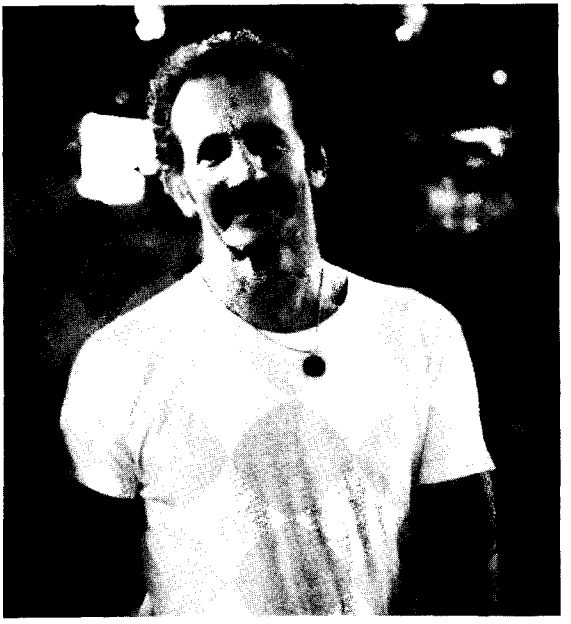

The Art of Poetry XXXIX
Philip Levine

I was first introduced to Philip Levine through the mail in the summer of 1976. I was studying literature at Berkeley, and my friends and I, all college freshmen and sophomores, were ardent readers of Levine, W.S. Merwin, Donald Justice, Gary Snyder and Hart Crane. A friend from the college literary magazine, The Berkeley Poetry Review, *introduced me to Ernest Benck, a California poet, who kindly sent some of both of our poems to Levine.*

Levine wrote back to us, marking our poems assiduously. Since then I have received many letters from him, always on

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yellow legal paper with comments like, "I'm not sure my remarks, which are fairly nasty at times, really indicate. . . ." His comments, though never nasty, were always serious, as if he took the business of correspondence to be part of the education of a poet. I had the feeling he wrote many such letters to young poets around the country: poets driving trucks, picking oranges, poets who were waiters and acupuncturists' assistants and college students. Levine takes his role as mentor with the responsibility of a sacred vocation. He has sometimes had trouble from the administrations of high-tuitioned writing programs for allowing auditors—poets who were a little older, talented and too broke to pay—into his classes.

Levine was born in Detroit in 1928, and left that city, as he puts it, after a succession of stupid jobs. He is the author of numerous books of poetry, including 7 Years from Somewhere *(which won the National Book Critics Circle Award),* Ashes *(the NBCC and National Book Awards),* They Feed They Lion *(inevitably mistitled in reference books), and, most recently,* A Walk with Tom Jefferson.

The interview took place in my Upper West Side apartment. Levine arrived looking very much the same as he had when I met him ten years earlier in Berkeley; wiry, agile, with a mobile face, curly hair, a boyish habit of movement. He wore enormous running shoes which seemed to emphasize his small frame, and he walked with a slight bounce which made him seem an inch or two taller.

I told him that Paris Review interviews usually take place in the writer's home and so I asked him to describe the place he lives and writes. He told me that in Fresno he lives in a small farmhouse in a district called The Fig Garden. Built in 1919, the house ("the oldest around here") stands on an acre of land, fronted by a huge eucalyptus tree, fruit trees and cedars. In the backyard, amidst twenty orange trees, alders, Modesto ash, and more eucalyptus, his wife Franny plants a legendary garden of vegetables, fruits and flowers.

"Our payments are one hundred and sixty five bucks," he said. "We bought it fifteen years ago when anybody could buy a house. And people ask me why I live in Fresno!"

Levine works in a small study overlooking the back garden.

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The room is filled with bookshelves ("of course it's cluttered because I'm something of a slob") and a number of keepsakes, among them a black and white photograph of a drawing by the Italian anarchist painter Flavio Costantini, which in a smaller form is the cover of Levine's volume Ashes, *a Robert Capa photograph of Spanish Republican soldiers at a campfire cooking soup, a picture of Lemon Still Jr., a fellow grease shop worker and the subject of a poem in* They Feed They Lion, *and a poster of airplane drawings by Arshile Gorky.*

"And there hangs from the ceiling a kind of mobile a friend gave me years and years ago. It's made of thistles, thorns, dry weeds. I don't know why it's lasted but it just hangs there and turns around in the wind, hitting me in the eye . . ."

INTERVIEWER

In *Twentieth Century Pleasures,* Robert Hass says that rhythm in poetry provides revolutionary ground through its direct access to the unconscious . . .

PHILIP LEVINE

We all agree with that. Rhythm is deep and it touches us in ways that we don't understand. We know that language used rhythmically has some kind of power to delight, to upset, to exalt, and it was that kind of rhythmic language that first excited me. But I didn't encounter it first in poetry . . . perhaps simply in speech, in prayer, preaching. That made me want to create it. My earliest poems were a way of talking to somebody. I suppose to myself. I spoke them and I memorized them. I constantly changed them. I would go out and work on my rain poem and improve it.

INTERVIEWER

Rain was always a favorite theme?

LEVINE

Rain was my first, and I guess, a constant theme. But things like wind in the winter, the trees, and my sense of relationship with them. You could actually see the stars, we were on the

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outskirts of Detroit, there were no factories around. So you could see the stars and, *oh the world is, you know, a cosmos, is immense.*

INTERVIEWER

When did you start writing?

LEVINE

Writing was something I did in school with some enjoyment because I did it well. And then, you know, I put it aside, the way you do—I guess I started getting interested in girls, what have you. I don't remember doing any writing at the ages of say, sixteen or seventeen. I rediscovered poetry at the age of eighteen.

INTERVIEWER

How did that happen?

LEVINE

I read Stephen Crane. He really thrilled me. I read him and I imitated him. I really think my poems were as good as his. His poems are terrible, they're very obvious—you know, *I saw a man running towards the horizon. I said, why are you running toward the horizon? He said to me, because blah, blah, blah.*

INTERVIEWER

Do you know a lot of poetry by heart?

LEVINE

My memory has faded badly. I used to know dozens of poems by heart. I memorized them when I worked in factories and recited them to myself.

INTERVIEWER

Did you work in an auto factory?

LEVINE

Yes. I worked for Cadillac, in their transmission factory, and

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for Chevrolet. You could recite poems aloud in there. The noise was so stupendous. Some people singing, some people talking to themselves, a lot of communication going on with nothing, no one to hear.

INTERVIEWER

How long did you work in the factories?

LEVINE

I started doing factory work at about the age of fourteen. When I turned college age I had to make a decision about what I was going to do about my life. My high school teachers encouraged me to go to college. I stood in line at Wayne State University to enroll, and when I got up to the head of the line, this woman said, "Can I help you?" I said, "I'd like to go to college." She said, "Do you want a bachelor's?" I said, "I already have a place to live." Because to me a bachelor's was a small apartment. I had no idea that there was such a thing as a bachelor's degree. The people at Wayne were incredibly savvy. Instead of laughing at me, she explained what my options were and what *bachelor's* meant. They were used to us shlumps out of the city of Detroit. There, at college, I encountered modern poetry. And I loved it. Loved it.

INTERVIEWER

When did you start showing your poetry to other people? Were you sending out poems when you were on the assembly line?

LEVINE

When I was about nineteen I showed my poems to one of my teachers at Wayne. He said these were incredible poems, poems that should be published. I said, "Oh really?"—I was thrilled—"How would I go about doing that?" He walked over to his bookshelf and brought back a copy of *Harper's*. He wrote down the name of the editor and said, "Send the poems to him. I met him once at a party, he may remember me. It doesn't matter, the poems are so good. Just send them." So I sent them. A month later they came back with a little printed

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note telling me they didn't suit their present editorial needs. I was just shocked. I took it to the teacher and said, "Why, you assured me." He said, "I don't understand it." He was a very sweet man, but he didn't know the first thing about publishing. So I took the whole thing to another teacher who actually wrote poetry. I wanted an explanation. He looked at the note, then the poems. He asked, "Why did you think they would take your work?" I told him that I had been assured they were wonderful poems. "Well," he said, "they're talented but they are not that good. They probably weren't even read at *Harper's*; they looked at your name, they never heard of you, forget it." I suddenly realized, of course, it's like everything else in the world. It is a business. I didn't try to publish again for a long time, until I was twenty-six or twenty-seven. I just forgot about trying to publish. It didn't seem all that important. I didn't know many people who published. I knew my work was going to get better. I had gone on supporting myself in other ways, so what was the difference. I went to Iowa for a year as a student. I thought I had a fellowship, but they didn't give it to me. I was supposed to come the year before but financial things kept me away. So I wrote them a letter and said please put if off until next year. They gave the fellowship to somebody else. I went there anyway and went to the classes without registering. There I met Don Justice, William Dickey, a poet named Henri Coulette, Robert Dana, W.D. Snodgrass. One semester, Robert Lowell was the teacher; the second semester, John Berryman. It was a fantastic year.

INTERVIEWER

What were your classes like?

LEVINE

Lowell wasn't very helpful with my poetry. I don't know how he was with the others; I think he was helpful with some of them. Berryman, on the other hand, also had the exterior of a patrician, but he was in love with the idea of being a slob.

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INTERVIEWER

So Berryman liked you?

LEVINE

He liked me a lot personally, and he worked very hard with me. He seemed to feel I had something genuine, but that I wasn't doing enough with it, wasn't demanding enough from my work. He kept directing me to poetry that would raise my standards. He knew an enormous body of poetry, and he wanted me to open myself to it. He was very sure of himself, very confident, and I think I caught some of that confidence and some of the confidence he had in me. Another very nice thing: when the semester ended, he said to me, "I'll let you send me some poems, four or five poems. I'll read them and comment on them and send them back. And that'll be that." So about a year and a half later I sent him four poems. He made his comments, and once again he let me know this was the last time. He was right, absolutely right. Out of the nest, into the world.

INTERVIEWER

How would you characterize Berryman's influence on your poetry?

LEVINE

First, he wanted me to learn much more. I quickly realized how much he knew and how much more resourceful he was as a poet because of it. I went back to Chaucer. That summer I read all the way through the huge Saintsbury *History of English Prosody*. It was the fifties, the country was going nowhere and neither was I; I had all sorts of time.

INTERVIEWER

What was it about your poems that interested Berryman?

LEVINE

There was something very particular in my poems Berryman

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liked, a combination of formality with a common American voice that wanted to be in contact with how Americans actually spoke. At the same time I didn't want to write "talky" poetry; I wanted to make those voices eloquent or song-like. When I tried to bring these two "aims" together I usually failed, but John praised the ambition. I met him at just the perfect time in my life. He treated me as an equal. He was incredible fun to be with. At night he could be hopeless, drunk and an imbecile, but at the time that seemed unimportant to me. In class he was true to us and to himself, and all of us were treated with equal candor and ruthlessness. When he lectured on the poetry he loved, somebody like Whitman or Milton, his excitement was so great he would quiver all over, almost as though that frail, wiry body couldn't contain his emotions. It was extraordinary, an incredible experience. I'm sure all the people who were in that class must have felt it.

INTERVIEWER

So did Berryman first introduce you to Walt Whitman's work? He seems the obvious and most central influence upon you, both thematically and in terms of the range and timbre of your poetry.

LEVINE

I came to Whitman at age twenty or so through Ulysses Wardlaw, God bless him. I went to Wayne with Ulysses, a black guy who I thought was a wonderfully talented poet. He wrote these loving, long Whitmanesque poems, and I was writing much craftier things. He'd say, "Levine, if you're going to be an important poet you are going to have to get into Whitman." I was talking Stevens, Eliot, very highbrow poets who to him were far too artsy. Ulysses would urge me to get into the big American thing, the thing which was so much more about our actual lives. So I finally read Walt, and I was much more impressed than I'd expected to be, but I still wasn't really overwhelmed. I think it was Berryman—yeah, I know it was Berryman—who gave a reading with commentary of the whole of "Song of Myself." It probably took four to six hours.

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I don't remember exactly how long. He gave it everything in him, and the poem took everything. It was ineffable, the finest poetry reading I've ever heard in my life, a light year beyond any other reading. I said to myself, Jesus Christ, this fucking stuff is just too much. It is so eloquent, it is so passionate, it is so up there and at the same time so totally in touch with what is down here.

INTERVIEWER

Who else do you feel influenced by? Do poets of your generation tend to read each other's newest work in the magazines and learn from each other?

LEVINE

The first big public reading I gave was with Gary Snyder back in 1958. I had never heard of him before that, and I was really knocked out. He read very well; I was lousy, a nervous wreck. I was impressed by his ability to use such an ordinary diction and get such extraordinarily precise images. It was his early work, the best work he ever did, *Riprap* and *Cold Mountain*. Now he talks about this great work he still has to do to save America, as though he's Doctor Feelgood, Doctor Know-it-all. Then he was just a marvelous young poet; now he's a serious and great man, and like all serious and great men he's boring. I don't think Galway Kinnell influenced me, but what's more important, he inspired me. When I read his great poem "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World," I said, my God, this is how good the poetry of my generation can be. I can remember exactly where I was when I first read it, on the second floor of the library in an armchair holding *The Hudson Review* and shivering with excitement.

INTERVIEWER

What about younger poets?

LEVINE

I read a great many of the younger poets. I happen to believe Keats was right when he said the poet is the least poetical

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of beings, and that he or she must be ready to inhabit whatever the world presents, be free to "pick about the gravel with the sparrows." I think Sharon Olds is likely to join the sparrows, as are Ed Hirsch and Garrett Hongo, who both write so intelligently. I'm so weary of that anti-intellectual stance: "I'm just standing here suckin' on a beer writin' these lines until the pool room opens." I love intelligent poetry—Stevens, Ammons, Tom Sleigh, Robert Morgan.

INTERVIEWER

Where does a poem begin for you? Do you take notes for poems? Do you get up in the middle of the night?

LEVINE

They begin in different ways, and over the course of my writing life the process has changed. When I was a kid speaking poetry I never wrote it down; those poems began with a phrase and then I would try to employ the vocabulary and the structure of the phrase to create a fabric of repetitions. When I started writing poetry at eighteen, the poems seemed to spring outward from a visual image. It was that precise visual image I was out to capture, that's what excited me; the poem became the means for pushing forward the images I wanted the reader to devour. Then Yeats set me on fire. I mean the language is exalted, yet it sounds like somebody talking and singing at the same time. I thought, *this is it.* And I still kind of feel *this is it.* This is the perfection of form. It's got speech, song, it's high rhetoric and yet it doesn't sound remote or false. A poem like "Easter, 1916." I said, Jesus Christ, this is so much what I *want.* It doesn't matter about his stupid attitudes. He wrote one poem about his daughter, such a sexist poem. But it's so beautifully done. I remember telling a woman friend of mine, isn't this an incredible poem? And she got very angry with me; it's so sexist, she said, look at this! I said, sure, it's like Eliot's anti-Semitic stuff, "the Jew squats on the windowsill;" fuck you, Eliot, but the poem is exquisite. Then somewhere in my forties I hit a kind of phase of automatic writing. I would really be taken, sort of seized, and just write

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the stuff! It would just come pouring out, hundreds of lines. Then the process of making a poem became quite different: it became seeing what was inside this great blast of language and imagery, and finding the core.

INTERVIEWER

How did you then revise? What was your process of shaping?

LEVINE

The process was reducing this, say, five hundred lines to one hundred fifty, tailoring and shaping it, finding the central imagery and throwing away what seemed excess or what was just part of the road to getting there. Then putting it together in some kind of dramatic, coherent, or narrative structure. That was fun, too.

INTERVIEWER

You've created your own recognizable sense of line. How did the Levine line come about?

LEVINE

The narrow line. It had two sources. In my first two books you'll find a great many poems written in a seven-syllable rhymed line. After a while I discovered that almost no one heard the rhymes, which are very subtle, and absolutely no one heard the seven syllables. I became so confident of the line that I didn't hesitate to vary it. I no longer needed that strict count. I began to rhyme irregularly and sometimes to write without rhyme at all. Lo and behold, I had become a free verse poet! Lately, I've been writing long line poems.

INTERVIEWER

Was that a shift in your way of hearing? Was the expansion to a longer line a conscious decision?

LEVINE

It wasn't conscious. The material, the writing that came out of me, had a relaxed quality, full of details, events; it had a

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strong narrative line, and I felt constricted by anything less than a truly long line. It happens so quickly or so much on its own that you're writing that way before you have an occasion to ponder it. This last autumn I had a wonderful season of writing up in Boston; I wrote two good-sized poems, both in long lines. They came in great bursts that totally consumed days and days. One is a true narrative poem. It's called "A Walk with Tom Jefferson." Tom Jefferson turns out to be a retired factory worker, black, in Detroit, with that name.

INTERVIEWER

Can you talk about working with your editor, Harry Ford? Has he influenced your craft?

LEVINE

No, he's had no influence on my craft because we never discuss that. What he's helped me with is my ability to concentrate totally on my poetry. He took my second book sight unseen, and he took it because he believed in my talent. *They Feed They Lion* had been turned down about a dozen times, twice by Wesleyan, who had published my first book, *Not This Pig*; they didn't like the title poem, or the title. I was dejected. I sat down and thought, "Who would I want to publish me?" The answer was simple—Atheneum or New Directions; they seemed the only publishers who cared about poetry or knew anything about it. I wrote both, saying, I'd like you to publish me. Harry Ford wrote back, "I don't believe the person who wrote your first book could write a bad book." He took the book without reading it. Can you imagine the joy in Mudville? Because he trusts me so much, I feel enormously obligated to give him nothing but the best I can do. Without him and James Laughlin at New Directions there wouldn't be any poetry published by the big publishers in New York; they've done it all for decades.

INTERVIEWER

You are very generous about corresponding with young struggling writers.

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LEVINE

It all grew out of what happened when I went to Iowa and they let me in the class though I wasn't registered. The class all knew I wasn't registered; we would go through this charade every week. John Berryman would say, Levine, your name is not on the class list. I would say, Oh, isn't that odd. And everybody would laugh. He would say, Do you want me to send the authorities a letter saying that Levine is worried about not getting credit? I'd say, don't bother. The class would laugh again. I felt welcomed by everyone, as though I *should* be there.

INTERVIEWER

Have you let people into your classes without paying?

LEVINE

Sure. When someone with real talent and no money shows, what are you going to do? At Columbia it came down to my offering to quit on the spot to keep a student in the class. At Tufts I've had some older people sitting in; the students seem utterly delighted to be able to meet these "real" poets and get a more adult perspective from them. I had a wonderful woman, Erica Funkhouser, a very accomplished, published poet, in the class. Several students thanked me for bringing her, although she'd come of her own accord. It was like having a second teacher, one much closer to them in age. Poetry has given me a great deal over the years, so when I see truly talented people, I want to help them. It seems like a natural thing to do.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel there's some sort of integrity in the poetry world because there isn't the lure of money?

LEVINE

It's not that we have the sort of sharks you'd find in Hollywood or in the cocaine business or in a professional sport like boxing. There are ways that the satisfactions and needs of the

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ego can get to you and corrupt you. We don't necessarily need money to corrupt ourselves.

INTERVIEWER

How have you avoided that?

LEVINE

I haven't entirely. There are a lot of people in poetry who aren't corrupted, who screw up rarely. We aren't perfect; we are people and we do dumb things. I served two years selecting manuscripts to be awarded grants of up to $20,000 by the National Endowment. All my friends knew I was doing this; people I didn't know knew it. In those two years I received only three pleas asking for special treatment, and two of them came from the same person, a friend. When I told him to get fucked, he couldn't understand why I was so angry, which suggests he couldn't even see where decent behavior ends. That is scary. Corruption is subtle, just like the Bible said. Many young poets have come to me and asked, How am I gonna make it? They feel, and often with considerable justice, that they are being overlooked while others with less talent are out there making careers for themselves. I always give the same advice. I say, Do it the hard way, and you'll always feel good about yourself. You write because you have to, and you get this unbelievable satisfaction from doing it well. Try to live on that as long as you're able. Don't kiss anyone's ass. Wait and be discovered or don't be discovered. I think I did it the hard way. I didn't kiss anyone's ass; I waited a long time; I didn't go to a school that would give me advantages. I didn't publish a book that anyone read until I was forty. But to be utterly honest, I think if something hadn't happened about then I might have become a very bitter man. It was getting to me. If I'd had to wait until I was fifty I don't know what lousy things I might have done.

INTERVIEWER

You treat some of the great novelistic themes—war and peace, power and class struggle and oppression in society, the

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shifts of luck and fortune with time—in your poems, particularly in your long poems.

LEVINE

What I regard as novelistic about my work is the telling of tales, which is utterly natural to me, and so is the presentation of characters. The other day when I was testifying in court in a civil disobedience case, the district attorney objected to my presentation because, he said, it was narrative. The judge sustained the objection; I tried to ask him what was wrong with a narrative, but he wouldn't answer. I was deeply wounded. How can a poet or fiction writer tell the truth in court if he or she can't present the events in a meaningful sequence, which is what a story is? The message is, Stay out of court. One of the aspects of my own poetry I like best is the presence of people who don't seem to make it into other people's poems. Much of our recent poetry seems totally without people. Except for the speaker, no one is there. There's a lot of snow, a moose walks across the field, the trees darken, the sun begins to set and a window opens. Maybe from a great distance you can see an old woman in a dark shawl carrying an unrecognizable bundle into the gathering gloom. That's one familiar poem. In others you get people you'd sooner *not* meet. They live in the suburbs of a large city, have two children, own a Volvo stationwagon; they love their psychiatrists but are having an affair with someone else. Their greatest terror is that they'll become like their parents and maybe do something dreadful, like furnish the house in knotty pine. You read twenty of those poems and you're yearning for snow fields and moose tracks.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel a split between your life as a political person and your life as a poet?

LEVINE

I'm cowardly. I should stop paying my taxes. I know that the government in Washington is full of terrible people with terrible plans. They will murder people here and abroad to gain

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more power. Those who have dominated our country most of my adult life are interested in maintaining an empire, subjugating other people, enslaving them if need be, and finally killing those who protest so that wealthy and powerful Americans can go on enjoying their advantages over others. I'm not doing a thing about it. I'm not a man of action. It finally comes down to that. I'm not so profoundly moral that I can often overcome my fears of prison or torture or exile or poverty. I'm a contemplative person who goes in the corner and writes. What can we do? I guess we can hang on and encourage each other, dig in, protest in every peaceful way possible and hope that people are better than they seem. We can describe ourselves as horribly racist people, which we are, as imperialists, which we have been and are, but we can also see ourselves as bountiful, gracious, full of wit, courage, resourcefulness. I still believe in this country, that it can fulfill the destiny Blake and Whitman envisioned. I still believe in American poetry.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you think contemporary American poetry has gone wrong, and where do you find its greatest vitality?

LEVINE

I'm not sure. Maybe it stopped believing in itself. Back in the late sixties we were an amazingly lively, diversified, and yet united bunch, and almost all of us were committed to standing up and being counted against the war, and many of us were concerned with new ways of living, new possibilities. Think of the ambition in Kinnell's work then, *Body Rags* and *The Book of Nightmares*, Denise Levertov's *Relearning the Alphabet*, that brilliant long poem by Robert Duncan, Adrienne Rich in *Leaflets* and *Diving into the Wreck*. I don't think all of the poetry was successful, but these poets were trying in their work to be whole men and women, to combine the "holiness of the heart's affections" with their sense of moral indignation, to stand for what was best in the American soul and against what was the most corrupting and disgusting. They saw their poetry coming out of both their private experiences

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and visions and their sense of citizenship, to use an old-fashioned word. Yes, these were large manly and womanly undertakings that we as a generation of poets could take pride in. And these weren't the only large undertakings: Lowell, Berryman, and Bishop were still writing very well. Rexroth and Creeley were at their best; Ginsberg was doing his last interesting stuff, and it was large; Wright, Merwin, Simpson were at the top of their form. Whatever you think of Bly's work now, he and his magazine were then involved in a campaign to make us see the deepest consequences of living the American lie. It was a brave effort, as was George Hitchcock's *kayak*, and marvelous poets were emerging out of these scenes, people like Haines and Simic. I think American poetry was right at the center of the American heart. But we did not change that heart. We did not stop the war. The war ended when the military wanted it to and Vietnam and her neighbors were plundered and leveled. We had such a powerful faith in the rightness of our cause, such a deep belief that if we articulated our vision it must become the American vision, for surely our fellow citizens didn't want innocent blood on their hands. I can remember feeling full of the power of a just cause and believing that power would not fail me. It failed me or I failed it. We didn't really change the way Americans lived, unless you take hairstyles seriously. I think it killed something in us, the way something died in Wordwsorth and many of his contemporaries when the French Revolution went first violent and later bourgeois. Everything we spoke out in behalf of got watered down and marketed and then forgotten. Maybe I'm nuts or maybe I'm just tired, but that's partly what I feel. Maybe it's also the proliferation of the writing workshops; maybe academia has managed to rent and spay us. Maybe the various endowments have institutionalized and neutralized us, when in fact we should have kept our outcast state, our poverty if need be, our discomfort, our rage; we should have turned and lived with animals. I think I may simply be talking about myself but maybe not. Don't let me leave you with the impression that there aren't wonderful poets out there, some superb ones who are all but unknown, poets who don't have careers, who

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just write poetry. I'm thinking of someone like John Engels, who teaches at some dinky school in Vermont. He is an absolutely adult poet, as good as any in the country; his work is beautifully crafted, passionate, and truly moral. I'll bet there are four or five others totally unknown who never learned how to bow down or manage a career or who didn't start out at an Ivy League school. Gerald Stern was unknown until he was about fifty. Hayden Carruth is now writing unbelievable poetry. John Haines got a glimmer of the limelight years ago, but John has the bad habit of saying what's on his mind; he won't be pruned. These poets will go on getting bad reviews or no reviews, but the true poetry audience will find their work and love it. That's happening right now with the work of Ruth Stone. Everywhere I go people are talking about her poems. It's all word of mouth. Is Marjorie Perloff, the literary critic, going to tell us? Hell no. The other day I read a piece of hers that was so stupid it took your breath away. She was lecturing Adrienne Rich on how to become an effective feminist poet, as though Adrienne had failed. Perloff told her she couldn't do it in her present voice because that voice had been influenced by the poetry of men, so she advised her to become a LANGUAGE poet and write incomprehensibly and thus revolutionize women's attitudes toward themselves. Such impertinence. Given the chance, she'd have lectured Whitman on why he should have written "Song of Myself" in Esperanto. This is the criticism of the Reagan age, and its purpose is no more and no less than to neuter poetry, to deprive it of its authority, to utterly tame it. Perloff is out to make a little structuralist out of Adrienne, to deprive her of her guts, her sexuality, her deeply earned rage, all of which come out of her experience. The poetry has authority because you know that. Perloff and all these other dwarves sit back smugly and say, "How can you believe such naive things, you're all merely determined by your social and linguistic contexts. How dare you believe you know something in your blood, how dare you shout out your joy or weep your sorrow." Here we are as a nation going through terrible times, needing poetry as much as we've ever needed it, and this little circle of elitists and—what

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did Blake call them?—"mockers" are urging on us a poetry of irrelevance. If we get a little excited about the facts of our lives they call us Benthamites, Romantics, or whatever the current evil is. Once Reagan came to power, you knew these lackeys were on the way; in fact they smelled his coming years in advance—they are those animals with noses to the wind to catch the latest currents. They will never give us a poetry of greatness, a poetry to help us face madness, exile, the grave. Like Reagan himself, they will pass; like Asian flu, they're with us for a few seasons, and then a new disease comes along.

INTERVIEWER

Somebody once asked you what question you would like to be asked and you said the question was, Are you happy you became a poet? What's the answer to that question now?

LEVINE

Oh, it's the same. I'm very happy I became a poet and for the same reasons. A few years back I was about to leave California and go East to teach at Tufts; I was alone, my wife had gone ahead to find a place for us to live. I was feeling a bit down—end of summer blues. Then the phone started ringing. I got six calls in the space of a day, all from people I'd met through poetry, all enormously affectionate calls either welcoming me back to Boston or bidding me farewell.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of the new generation?

LEVINE

The day before the last election I was on Studs Terkel's radio program in Chicago. He was down, especially down on young people. He thought all the young college people were voting for Reagan. I said, "I meet these young people who want to write poetry, and they're terrific, they're just like the young people of the sixties." He said, "Really, I don't meet them." I said, "Yeah, but you don't teach poetry." And it was true. The college kids he was meeting all wanted to be presidents of

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banks, but the ones I meet don't want that; they want to create a life for themselves in the arts, a life they can respect. Money is something they know they need, but they have no itch for it or power. Studs is an extraordinary optimist, but the day before Reagan's second election was not a day for optimism.

INTERVIEWER

Would you characterize yourself as an optimist?

LEVINE

Of course, although I try to protect myself. When I see a fight in the subway, I don't try to stop it. My wife, the total optimist, is the kind of person who would rush over and say, Now, fellows. But I'd grab her and say, Honey, this ain't our business. In fact this just happened in Paris; there was a fight going on and she wanted to make sure the bigger guy didn't hurt the little one, and I said, "Honey, they will resolve it; this is local French politics."

INTERVIEWER

Do you keep a journal?

LEVINE

Since 1973 or '74. They are like diaries, but, reading them, you might never know what I did on a particular day. A lot is just physical description, details, surroundings, a particular smell even. I remember one entry I used for a poem. We were crossing the Pyrenees and our car broke down. I had to wait hours outside a garage while they fussed with it. It's an awful feeling because I grew up owning old bad cars, but I'm no good with my hands. I can change a tire or a water hose, but that's about it, I'm hopeless. While sitting there, I noticed these guys at the garage had put in a huge garden. This was in Andorra, this little principality up in the mountains. I'd visited it in the middle sixties when it was an untarnished place, a sleepy Catalan town in an exquisite valley. But now it was this commercial hell hole with international skiers, and cute little chalets for rent. The air was fouled by all the Mer-

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cedes and BMW traffic, and the roar of motorcycles was horrendous—all the locals had money and wheels. But some things had survived in spite of the physical and mental pollution. These guys, when they weren't fixing cars, were out there farming. So I took notes and later used it all. I find when I look back at my journals that a lot of material gets written when I'm traveling; it becomes a way of using the "unscheduled hours."

INTERVIEWER

I would like to ask you about some specific poems and their geneses. What about the title poem from your early book, *On the Edge*?

LEVINE

I remember what "On the Edge" came out of very clearly—a lecture on Edgar Allen Poe, delivered in French, a language I don't understand. I sat right in the front; I didn't know it was going to be in French. The speaker was a very nice young man, an Argentine I'd met. There was almost no one there—maybe ten people—so once he began in French I couldn't leave, it would have been too rude; so I sat through fifty minutes, an academic hour. I focused on small things, like the delightful way he said Poe's name in this French way, ED-ga-PO . . . so much more delicious than Edgar Allan Poe in a heavy Midwestern voice, the way my high school lit teacher had said it. So musical, ED-ga-PO. The French take Poe much more seriously than we do. I've always thought of Poe as the last poet in the world I would want to be, so I just imagined myself as Poe. The poem also came out of not writing. I was going through one of my extensive three-month dry spells, or maybe I was simply dissatisfied with what I was writing. So I became Poe. The poem is really, I guess, about not writing, about the power one gains by not committing oneself; one becomes almost God-like. That was the vision of the poem, for God won't commit himself. We don't see Him, we have these rumors of His existence, hints of His immense power, we're told of His enormous concern for us, and we don't see it. So

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I said, Well, maybe I'll be God-like, I will remain silent, I will give away nothing. I'm sure the idea came from my encounters with certain people who never seem to commit themselves and gain a temporary power, especially over a loudmouth like me.

INTERVIEWER

You often make casual references to the lives of poets; you always refer to them in a way which reminds me of what E.M. Forster wrote in *Aspects of the Novel*, thinking of all the writers, dead and alive, writing in the same room. You seem to know a great deal and also intimate little bits about the lives of poets. Did you study their biographies when you were starting to become a poet?

LEVINE

Yes. And the letters of poets have been a great fascination. Often the poets come through so much more in their letters. If you have only Eileen Ward's wonderful biography of Keats, he almost ceases to be a person, he's so perfect; but in the letters there are his little smallnesses, his gossip, and the greatness of his mind and imagination. The miracles of him which never reached his poetry. He's much larger and also more human. Wilfred Owen is so distant in his wonderful poems, and he can be so intimate in his letters. And Pound is such a complexity; he is so generous at one moment and such a petty little racist at another. And so funny and brilliant, and then by turns ponderous and self-assured. He's ready to lecture Williams on delivering children.

INTERVIEWER

Have any of the poets' letters surprised you and given you a completely different idea about the character of the writer?

LEVINE

Byron's surprised me a great deal. I found such a passionate and human presence; in the biographies and in many of the poems he seems so distant, so Byronic, as though he were always aware of the figure he cut. Dylan Thomas's letters were

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an incredible revelation, especially the early ones. The man was so sophisticated politically; by that I mean he saw the world much as I do, as a true Blakean anarchist. The later letters are awful, all the begging for money, all the complaining. But I'll take them all just to have those magnificent ones he wrote to the young novelist he was in love with, so generous and visionary. I love Hart Crane's letters. He was, at the start, just a Midwestern jerk, just like me, and he tells wonderful tales, he can really move you. One that describes Isadora Duncan in Cleveland is worth any number of his lesser poems. They are wonderful to have because there isn't that much poetry, and so much of what is there is so difficult to enter, so alluring and so confounding; compared to them the letters are open. What's so lovely about these letters is that they come out of the same sensibilities and often show the same amazing flair with language.

INTERVIEWER

What about your poem "Heaven"? How did that come about?

LEVINE

"Heaven" is a very realistic poem. I worked with the main character; we were drivers together for Railway Express. We handled big trucks. He was on probation because he was incredibly lecherous; we would go to people's houses and if a woman would answer the door, he would always try to seduce her, feel her up; so these women would call back and complain and say driver so and so did such and such. He had a former wife he had done time for beating. He talked about that, he even had a picture of her in his apartment. He was an awful man. That's one element of him I never let into the poem; I only suggested that he was awful. He scared me, too; he was capable of a kind of terrible violence. But on one occasion he really charmed me. We went into some rather wealthy home, down into the basement to get this trunk. We filled out the forms. Then we went to lift the trunk and it was almost unliftable, it was full of tools. I mean it must have weighed five to

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six hundred pounds, full of steel tools, and as I tried to stand up with the trunk I ripped my pants. He said, "Put it down!" He said to the woman of the house who had let us in, "I'm sorry, your husband is going to have to pack more sensibly. You can't ask two mortals to take this up that flight of stairs." He said, "Look what you did to my buddy's pants. Show her." So I turned around and showed her that my pants were ripped. He said to this woman, who was rather elegant, you know, upper middle class, a doctor's wife, "You are going to have to mend his pants, he can't go out there like this." He told me to go into the bathroom and hand the pants out; we did it quite genteelly, and she came down with a needle and thread and sewed the pants up. I mean, he demanded! You have to do this! He was nuts.

INTERVIEWER

The location and the tone of "They Feed They Lion" indicates a shift in your versification and in the intensity of your voice. How did the poem come about?

LEVINE

I had been to Detroit after the riots in 1968 and I was struck by a number of things. One was how scared I was. The riots took place in exactly the same neighborhood I grew up in. I went back with a set of rather standard emotions, or standard for me anyway, about how wonderful it was that black people were letting white Americans know what this place was all about. But when I got there I was scared. People were looking at me like I was exactly what I was—middle class, middle-aged, white. There was a kind of boiling up of different emotions that I hadn't expected, and it was that complexity of emotions that really produced the poem—my own rage toward America, my own anger. I mean, this was the America of the Vietnam War, and to me it was as though we were fighting two racist wars, one in Vietnam and one in the cities of America. We didn't have Asians, we had blacks to persecute and kill and firebomb, or morally, mentally and emotionally firebomb. So a lot of those emotions just boiled up. I wrote

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the poem very quickly. I went to a party, a wedding party, and I got very drunk, and smoked a lot of dope, which is something I rarely do (I find it bad for my memory), and I had a good time. There was a lot of dancing at this party, and I danced and danced. It was a time of crazy dance parties. I went home and in the middle of the night I woke up with the idea for the poem. But I was still a wreck. I didn't try to write it, and in fact I waited perhaps two or three days with the notion that there was this poem, it was going to look this way, the line was going to be influenced by Christopher Smart's line in "Jubilate Agno." I waited about three days, and then I felt really quite sane, fit, smart, and I wrote the poem, probably in an hour, hour and a half.

INTERVIEWER

I wanted to ask you about the genesis of a very different kind of poem, "On the Murder of Lieutenant José del Castillo by the Falangist Bravo Martinez, July 12, 1936."

LEVINE

The immediate stimulus was a book and also a radio broadcast. The book was the Hugh Thomas history of the Spanish Civil War. I came across this familiar sequence of events that lead to the death of Garcia Lorca. It began with a building strike in Madrid. The strikers were attacked by a group of *señoritos*, young unmarried men of means, of a fascist persuasion. They pulled up to this building site, shot some strikers to death, and raced off in a car. Del Castillo saw this and pursued them. They resisted arrest, there was gunfire, and two of them were killed. About a week later a note was thrown into his barracks that he would be murdered in revenge. While he was off duty, walking in the park on a Sunday, this hired killer, Bravo Martinez, shot him to death. His comrades were enraged; they went out and grabbed a very powerful right wing journalist named Calvo Sotelo, a man who had been denouncing the strikers day after day in his newspaper columns. They pretended they were arresting him, but they had no warrant; they bumped him off. They felt he was responsible for the

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death of their comrade. The war broke out a week later, and the official story Thomas tells is that the fascists in Grenada seized Garcia Lorca and took his life in revenge for the murder of their hero Sotelo, a writer for a writer. A horrifying chain of events. The death that most obsessed me was the anonymous one, that of this courageous cop who lost his life protecting the rights of strikers. The whole world mourned the loss of Garcia Lorca. Then I was driving home early one Sunday morning; I had the radio on and I got this black preacher from Chicago. My head was immersed in the Spanish thing. The preacher was blessing people who because of sickness or troubles couldn't make it to church that day. He'd name the people and say something for each, and for this one man he said something like, "Bless you, Charlie Smith, and hang on, old soldier." He used that antiquated expression I used to hear as a kid, "old soldier." And I suddenly thought there are blessings still going out for that man, del Castillo, who gave his life for ordinary working people way back forty-some years before, and that this blessing the black preacher gave was, in a way, for del Castillo too. And I just went home and wrote the poem. Some years later a book came out that made it clear that del Castillo's death had nothing to do with the death of Garcia Lorca — Ian Gibson's *The Death of Lorca*. The people of Grenada who murdered Lorca did it for even more disgusting motives. Not even for his politics, which weren't left anyway. They hated him because he was so fucking talented, because he was bisexual; they hated him the way dumbbells hate smart people, the way the graceless hate someone amazing. But it didn't change my feelings for the poem at all.

INTERVIEWER

Do you know your own poems by heart?

LEVINE

No, I make an effort not to learn them by heart. I know a lot of people memorize their poems and give readings from memory, but I try to forget mine. I find that makes the readings more interesting for me; I'm often actually surprised by

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the phrasing, really quite delighted by it. Also, I don't want to sit down and write my own poems again; I want my mind clear of them. At my age the big danger for a poet is that he's going to rewrite his own work. One can feel very secure doing another version of what already worked.

INTERVIEWER

What about the poem "Let Me Begin Again"?

LEVINE

I got that phrase "let me begin again" in my head, and the images took me to an emotional field that must have been waiting inside me for some kind of release. I realized that I wanted to enter my life exactly as I had the first time but with one huge difference. This time I wanted to love my life and myself. I was suddenly struck by the fact that in spite of the impossible and unique gift of a life, it took me so long to learn that I and my life were loveable.

INTERVIEWER

What made this change?

LEVINE

Maybe it was the constant love that I was receiving from my kids and my wife and my best friends. I thought, Hey, I must be okay. At any rate, there was someplace in there where I began to feel differently about myself, and in the poem, I'm saying, "let me begin again." Once again I'm going to be born in a hospital named for an automobile, which I was, in Henry Ford Hospital. But this time I'm going to be wise with the knowledge that every human being is enormously unusual, different, and loveable. I think it's a poem of affirmation.

INTERVIEWER

You've written a great deal about family life.

LEVINE

Yes, about both my families, the one I was born into and

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the one my wife and I have created. To me they truly feel like two different entities. One exists mainly in memory, for most of those people have died. I'm very powerfully tied to the one we've created, to my kids, and now to the families they're creating.

INTERVIEWER

It's very hard to have a clear sense of the family you come from because you seem to fictionalize it in your poems. It's not consistent. For example, did your father leave your family when you were a small child?

LEVINE

My father died when I was very young. But often the speaker in my poems is not me; when it's me, he died, and when the speaker is someone else the father could have done anything. As a child of five his dying was leaving; I didn't understand death. You're absolutely right, that family is often fictionalized, partly to protect the innocent or the guilty, however you see those people. I've invented relatives I never had so I could talk about the ones I did have without the fear of insulting people I love. I have one relative I love a great deal who did a variety of things the world might call awful. I don't see his or her behavior that way at all; I'm deeply moved by his or her rebelliousness and audacity.

INTERVIEWER

Another poem of affirmation is "One for the Rose."

LEVINE

I like that poem. The other day I was talking to Galway Kinnell and he mentioned where he was at age twenty-five—Paris. He mentioned he was a very good friend of very famous people. And here I was at the same age, a schmuck working in a factory. So I'm saying, Why? I'm saying, Why didn't I do it right, why did I have to go to this stupid wedding in Akron, and take all those buses to get there? I remember the poem appeared in *The New Yorker*, and they questioned that Akron

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is hundreds of miles south of Detroit. They're wonderful; they must be inaccurate about nothing. I said, Why don't you call the Greyhound Bus station and find out how you get to Akron from Detroit, and you'll discover that going with them it *is hundreds of miles. In the poem I take joy in the fact I did it* the hard way. I might as well. When you get some place in your life, and you look back and see you did it the dumb way, you might as well find some reason for admiring the way you did it, because you're stuck with it.

INTERVIEWER

It's a more personal way, perhaps.

LEVINE

By not going to Paris to study at the foot of Gertrude Stein or going to Harvard to study with Harry Levin or Walter Jackson Bate or Archibald MacLeish, I stayed at home and studied with my equals, people of my own age, which may have been right for me. I was better off with my equals. What was I going to write about Gertrude Stein? I met a woman once who lived in a house here in New York with Emma Goldman, with whom she was in tutelage. I asked her what Emma was like. She said, "Well, first thing, she never taught me anything, because she didn't like women, so she never really talked to me." I said, "She didn't like women?" She said, "No, she didn't think women were serious." She said, "My main remembrance of her was that in the morning she had a little glass bell; when she awakened she rang it. And we would bring her breakfast up to her." I thought, my God, this great freedom fighter for anarchism and the rights of women and workers and everything else! Isn't it marvelous. Who would have guessed?

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about the Tom Jefferson poem, your most recent.

LEVINE

I went back to Detroit last October. I discovered in some of the areas that had been burned out back in '67 or torn down

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for an urban renewal that never took place, people had moved back in, leading what was almost a semi-rural life. Much of what's in the city was absent; there were no stores around, very few houses, no large buildings. Lots of empty spaces, vacant lots, almost like the Detroit I knew during the war. And people were farming, too, gardening on a scale. They had truck gardens, kept animals, what have you. It was right near the ballpark, so at night when the Tigers were playing there would be thousands of people there. Then they would get in their cars and leave; the place would be almost empty. I met a guy who lived in one of these houses. He didn't own it or rent it, and in fact he didn't even know who owned it. He described his life there, and the poem rose out of the conversation we had. It also came out of the hope that the city might be reborn inside itself, out of its own ruins, phoenix-like, rising out of its own ashes. Except I don't see it in heroic terms. The triumphs are small, personal, daily. Nothing grandly heroic is taking place; just animals and men and flowers and plants asserting their right to be, even in this most devastated of American cities.

INTERVIEWER

Nothing heroic is happening in Detroit.

LEVINE

Nothing epic. Just the small heroics of getting through the day when the day doesn't give a shit, getting through the world with as much dignity as you can pull together from the tiny resources left to you. It's the truly heroic. The poem is a tribute to all these people who survived in the face of so much discouragement. They've survived everything America can dish out. No, nothing grandly heroic is happening in Detroit. I guess nothing grandly heroic ever took place there; it was always automobiles, automobiles, hard work, and low pay.

—**Mona Simpson**

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Portfolio

Monotypes

Michael Byron

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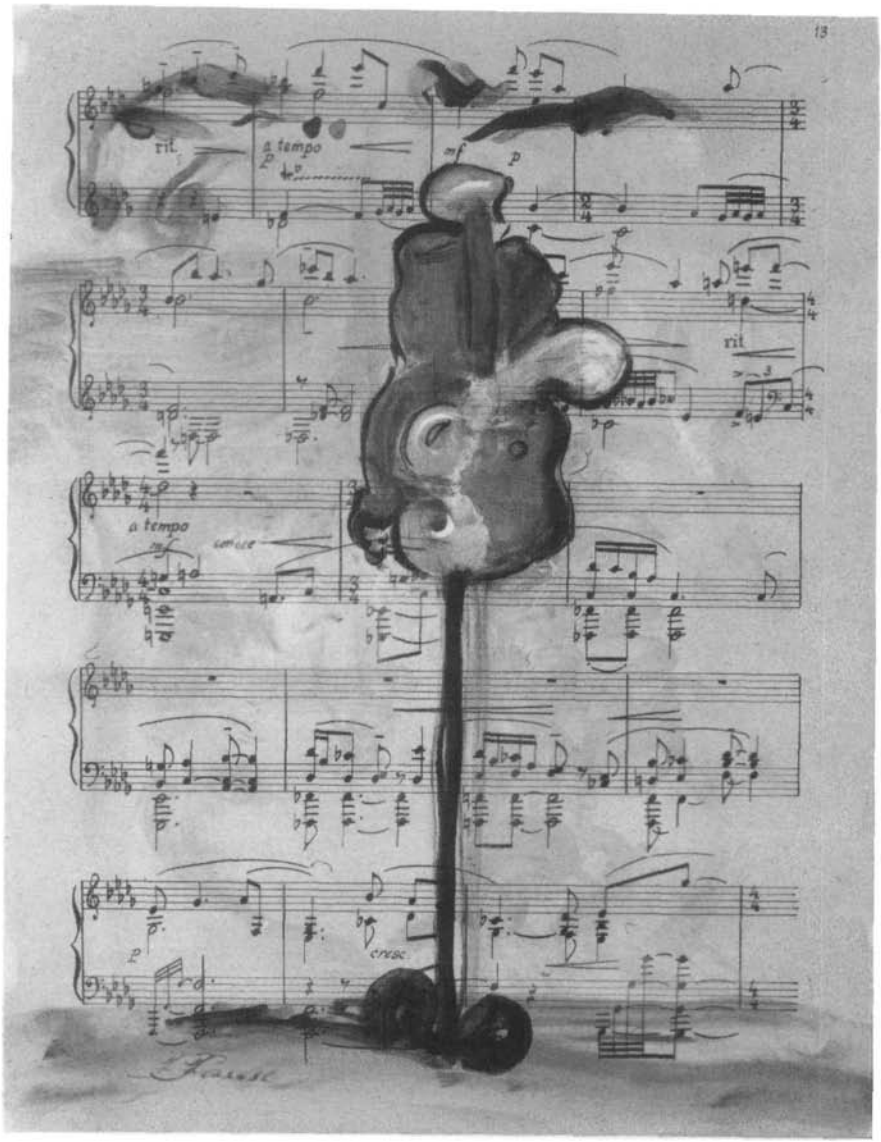

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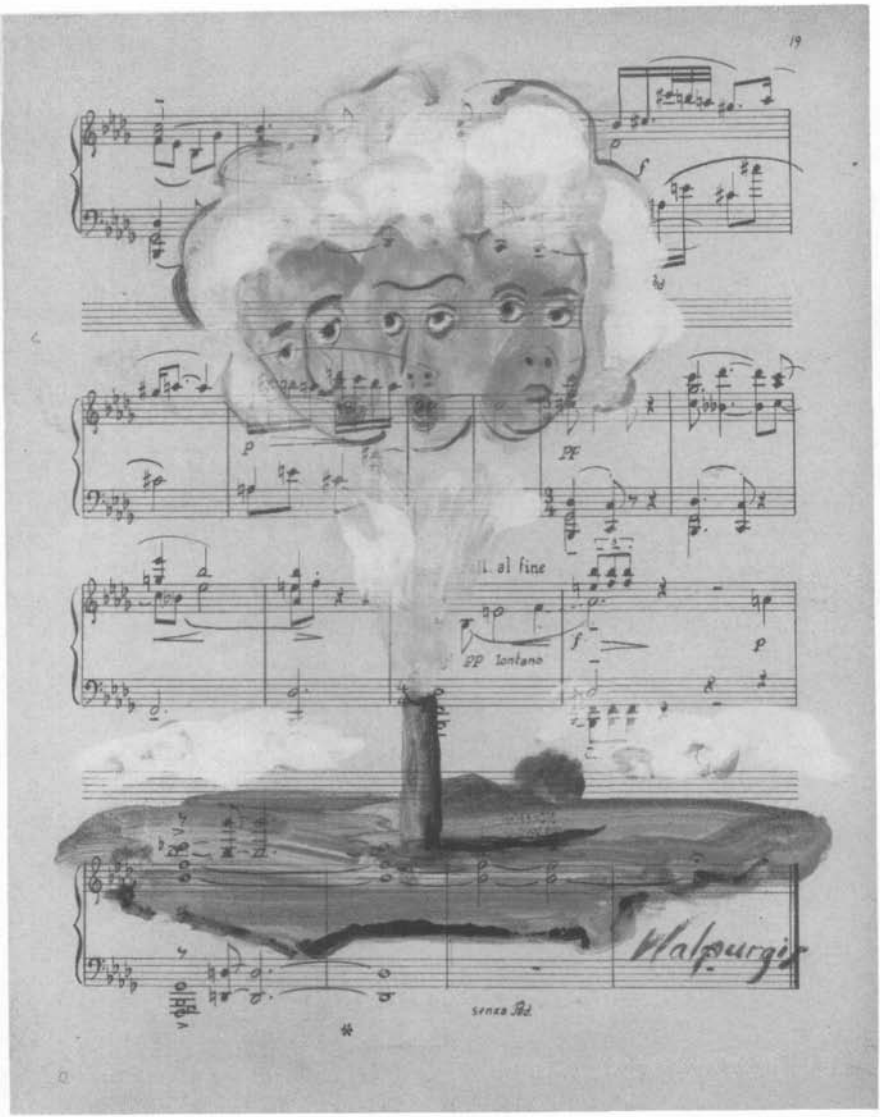
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ледствие этого, часть ее обвалилась, обнажив гладкий край
. Переднее трехугольное помещение было двухэтажным,
льствуют: 1) два окна, расположенные одно над другим;
тупа вдоль длинной стороны помещения, ширина выступа
ый опирались балки перекрытия. Второй этаж этого поме-
щения имел, вероятно, жилое назначение, на что указывают прямо-
угольные ниши (патуш
по сторонам окна.
следующее помеще-
(одностолбное) силь-
вытянутое коридоро-
разно
ям дл
Татев
Сплошной
ческий
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ются двумя
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илось результатом по-
лнейш
перестройки:
деление
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несколько
комнат (ныне эти по-
ние, небрежно слож-
ные стены
разруша-
лись, ибо они не имели
связи с кладкой основ-
ных стен). Обширность
помещения и наличие
ски
указывают на то,
что здесь помещалась
трапезная, что с дру-
гой стороны, видимо
ти рядом с
(через сени переход) расположены
и связанные с ней хозяйст
ные помещения.
трапезной следует открытое
стороны монастыря помещение, откуда
имеется вход в уз
ю *кухню*,
торая определяется по наличию здесь
каменной удлинен
На вн
ком (0.87 м) постаменте сооружен ка-
менный
нем сущ
оторого имеется отверстие для дымо-
ходов, соответствующих
ртика.
тверстие имеется и в крестовом своде,
который, в противоположность
ьным помещениям монастыря, пере-
крыта кухн
е, являющееся основным
источник
помещение ку
кончано. В южной части
ее имеется подвальное хранилище
ное отмеченному выше.[1]

Рис. 16. Татевский монастырь. Южный корпус. Вид
него из жилых помещений с надпи
на карни

[1] Подробно обследовать его не уда
, так как оно было сплошь завалено ка-
нями.

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Но здесь, в Крыму, появление этого мотива обязано было местной традиции, уходящей глубокими корнями в варварское искусство раннего средневековья, где змея постоянно выступает в украшениях одежды — на фибулах из могильников VI — VII вв. в Суук-су и Керчи.[1] Корни этого мотива идут еще глубже — в античность.[2]

Мотив змеи, широко распространенный в Закавказье и Северном Причерноморье, прослеживается, таким образом, на протяжении почти всего средневековья — с V по XIII в.; это говорит о его длительном бытовании и устойчивости. Связь изображений змеи с проёмом в здании (входом или окном) или украшением одежды указывает на значение змеи и, соответ-

Рис. 8. Татевский монас[тырь] фасаде (рис. Ю. П. Гре-

ственно, ее изображения — как [покро]вительницы дома (храма, гостиницы, города и покровите[ля]

Эта [ан]тичная тема, усвоенная [ран]ним искусством феодальной Армении, была [на]родной в самом [вы]соком слова и, несомненно, связана [с] чисто языческими [пред]ставлениями глубокой древности, родственными [мо]логией родовог[о] Пережитки таких представлений на Кавказе, в [ча]стности в Армении, до недавнего времени: [в] прошлом столетии [в] каждом доме имел змею-покровительницу, доброго [ду]ха-[по]кровителя.[3]

[1] Л[ес]ков. [Ис]следования [по] [ис]тории [ма]териальной культуры Крыма. (= ИГАИМК, вып. 11[2] Т[ам] [же]
[3] Л[ес]ков. [Ис]следования [по] [ис]тории [ма]териальной культуры Крыма. (= ИГАИМК, мет арм[ян]
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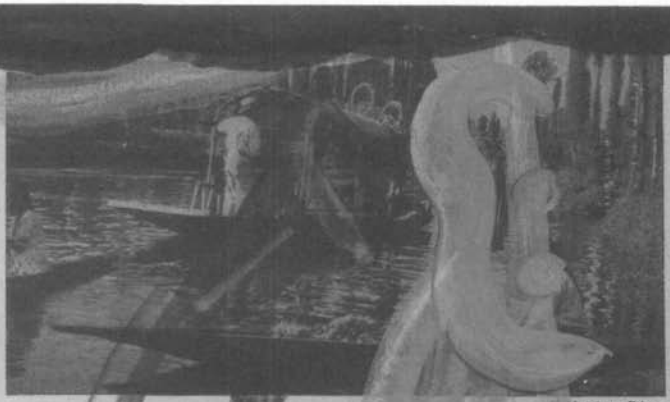

H. Armstrong Roberts

No visitor to Mexico should miss seeing the lovely [illegible] are crowded with flower-covered [illegible] bearing [illegible] and vegetables, fruits, flowers, and

with vegetables and flowers, [illegible] like floating gardens themselves. [illegible] see the islands of flowers, hear [illegible] music of guitars, and feel the [illegible] breezes, we wonder if [illegible] more beautiful.

While we rest on the bench [illegible] along one of the canals, Señor López tells us that these Floating Gardens were here long before the first white men came to Mexico. When we ask him to tell us more about the early days of Mexico, he says that we should first visit the great pyramids built by the Indians long, long ago.

A visit to the Pyramid of the Sun. Our bus carries us out of town back along the Pan American Highway for a few miles. Then we turn off onto a side road and ride past fields of maguey (mäg wā'). Maguey is a plant that looks like our century plant. Next we travel down a tree-lined road and suddenly there looms ahead of us a tremendous pyramid—the [illegible]mid[illegible] the Sun. Here the ancient [illegible]ans worshiped their sun god.

[illegible] climb to the pyramid, [illegible] grow. Señor López [illegible] to the top. But we [illegible] make the climb. Breathless, [illegible] reach the summit of this man[illegible] mountain of stone and mortar.

[illegible] below us stretches a thrilling [illegible] the fields of corn and mag[illegible] are other huge mounds, some of them still unexplored. Not far away is the Pyramid of the Moon, and to the right we see a great depression in the ground that must have been some sort of theater.

Who were the Toltecs? When we ask this question of Señor López, he reminds us that Mexico was inhabited by Indians long before Columbus discovered the New World. One of the most highly civilized of these early tribes was the Toltecs. They built many great [illegible] temples, and [illegible] that they

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Toronto—Black Star

The Indians of the Amazon jungles fashion a dugout canoe from a log with amazing skill. Some of their canoes are large enough to hold twenty or more persons. Note the white vest on the Indian man. Perhaps he obtained it from some rubber trader.

food out of the cook pot with a gourd and eats it with his fingers. These people have no forks.

Dangers of the jungle. The jungles are so dense, and ... vines so thick that in many places the rays of the sun never reach the ground. We should find the jungle a gloomy place indeed except for the brilliantly colored birds ... Some of the rivers are large ... a mile or two broad. Indians ... jungle ... trails that ... could never find ... through the ...

We should find the jungle terrifying, too, because of the fierce jaguars, stinging ants, ... snakes, anteaters, sloths, howling monkeys, and millions of mosquitoes. But the native of the forest does not seem to be afraid of these creatures. He knows that if he keeps out of their reach they can do him no harm.

The story of rubber. Farther down the river the steamer paused at a tiny village set in a clearing near the bank. There were a few thatched houses and some dugout canoes pulled up along the bank. This was a rubber gatherers' camp.

Every morning, unless the rain is too heavy, the rubber gatherers set out for the jungle. Each one works a certain part of the forest. Sometimes these sections are five or six miles long and a mile wide. There may be as many as 200 rubber trees under one gatherer's care. The rubber gatherer follows a little path from tree to tree. When he comes to a rubber tree, he cuts a gash in the bark. He then hangs a cup under the gash. By noontime he has finished his circular route and is back in camp.

In the afternoon he sets out once again, this time to collect the *latex* (LAY-teks), or sap, that has flowed into the cups. This latex is later poured, little by little, over a stick which is held in the smoke of a fire. Gradually the

Brazil nuts grow inside a large shell. They are good to eat; they also yield an oil used in oil painting, and in oiling delicate machinery.

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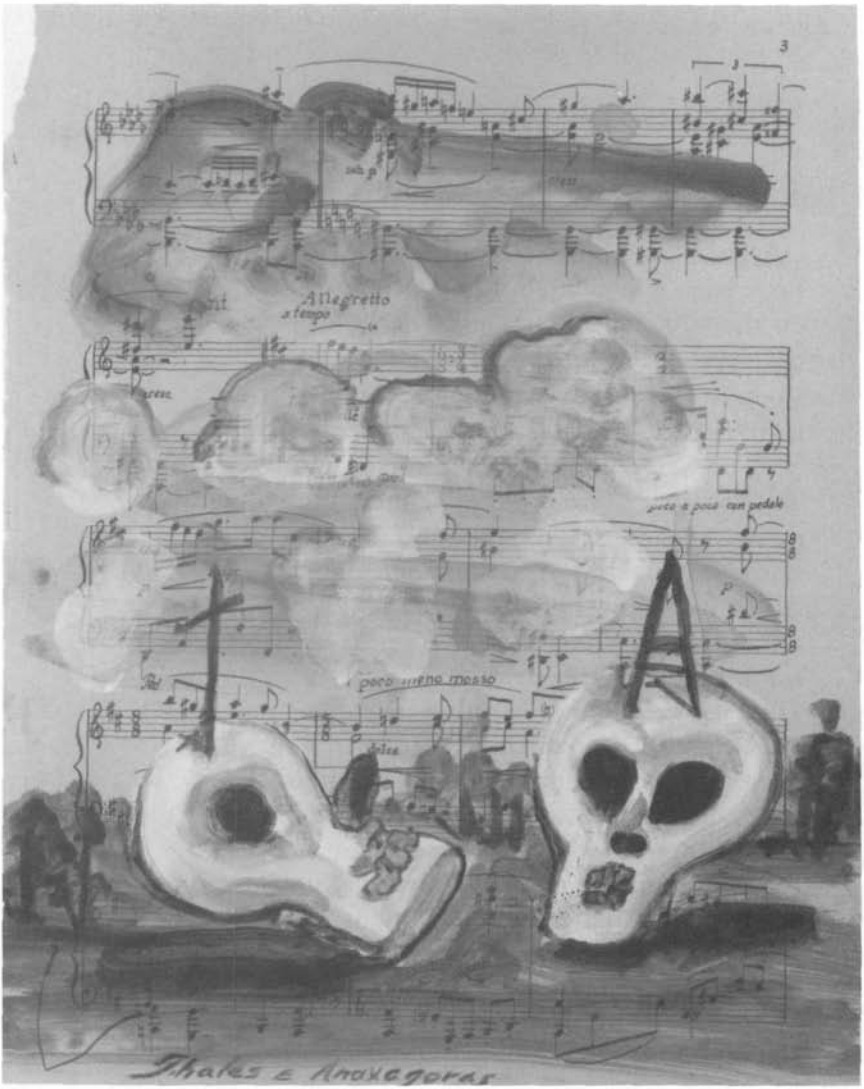

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Karl Kirchwey

House Lights Down

They have come from dinner at the nearest new
restaurant—
you know the kind: bottle glass in the window,
brass rails, and a fanciful line of red neon
on the wall. They have known enough to
order Sancerre with the fish. And now they
stoop in the rapidly-gathering twilight,
helping each other off with their coats.
She is wearing a dress from Alcott and Andrews.
The sprigged white flowers like breaths on a black field
cannot chasten the lines of her body
as the air tones down to meet her silhouette.
A necklace flickers briefly
at her throat like an eddy of silver
from a subterranean river.
Then the last light fails with a palpable after-image,
as if it had fled down the throat of an hourglass.
I imagine the stagehand flinging the iron
wheel of the rheostat to bring on this darkness
as if tilting the world with his hand.
For a moment they seem like our first parents, lorn
on the veldt, that barbaric gold light fading;
and, of the strange cries in the night ahead,
none stranger than that of their own conjunction,
the constellations unnamed above them
and God not yet interpreted; only
this clamor for a voice and its intimation
in the ear of an ambiguous companion,
no better than oneself, but other.

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David Mamet

One April, 1988

What was it?
Something became lodged in the machine.
That was it. Which inflection could not cure.
A tenuous hold much worse
Than no hold at all.
Who braved that consignment
And who braved that fall
Learned in the solitude
Of a white sickroom—
What choice had they
But not to resist?
You love that texture of a sheet
And you will pay for it.
So sweet, so sweet, he said,
Then, don't stop.
No stop for it.
Why?
A carnival.

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Miguel Hernández

Lullaby of the Onion

(Dedicated to his son, after receiving a letter from his wife in which she said she had nothing to eat but bread and onions)

The onion is frost
shut in and poor.
Frost of your days
and of my nights.
Hunger and onion,
black ice and frost
large and round.

My little boy
was in hunger's cradle.
He was nursed
on onion blood.
But your blood
is frosted with sugar,
onion and hunger.

A dark woman
dissolved in moonlight
pours herself thread by thread
into the cradle.
Laugh, son,
you can swallow the moon
when you want to.

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Lark of my house,
keep laughing.
The laughter in your eyes
is the light of the world.
Laugh so much
that my soul, hearing you,
will beat in space.

Your laughter frees me,
gives me wings.
It sweeps away my loneliness,
knocks down my cell.
Mouth that flies,
heart that turns
to lightning on your lips.

Your laughter is
the sharpest sword,
conqueror of flowers
and larks.
Rival of the sun.
Future of my bones
and of my love.

The flesh flutters,
sudden as an eyelid,
and the baby is rosier
than ever.
How many linnets
take off, wings fluttering,
from your body!

I woke up from childhood:
don't you wake up.
I have to frown:
always laugh.
Keep to your cradle,
defending laughter
feather by feather.

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Yours is a flight so high,
so wide,
that your body is a sky
newly born.
If only I could climb
to the origin
of your flight!

Eight months old you laugh
with five orange blossoms.
With five little
ferocities.
With five teeth
like five young
jasmine blossoms.

They will be the frontier
of tomorrow's kisses
when you feel your teeth
as weapons,
when you feel a flame
running under your gums
driving toward the center.

Fly away, son, on the double
moon of the breast:
it is saddened by onion,
you are satisfied.
Don't let go.
Don't find out what's happening,
or what goes on.

—translated from the Spanish
by Don Share

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Bruce Weigl

Elegy

Into sunlight they marched,
into dog day, into no saints day,
and were cut down.
They marched without knowing
how the air would be sucked from their lungs,
how their lungs would collapse,
how the world would twist itself, would
bend into the cruel angles.

Into the black understanding they marched
until the angels came
calling their names,
until they rose, one by one from the blood.
The light blasted down on them.
The bullets sliced through the razor grass
so there was not even time to speak.
The words would not let themselves be spoken.
Some of them died.
Some of them were not allowed to die.

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Agha Shahid Ali

Snow on the Desert

"Each ray of sunshine is eight minutes old,"
Serge told me in New York one December
night. "So when one looks at the sky, one sees

the past?" "Yes, Yes," he said, "especially
on a clear day." On January 19,
1987, as I very

early in the morning drove my sister
to Tucson International, suddenly
on Alvernon and 22nd Street

the sliding doors of the fog were opened,
and the snow, which had fallen all night, now
sun-dazzled, blinded us, the earth whitened

out, as if by cocaine, the desert's plants,
its mineral-hard colors extinguished,
wine frozen in the veins of the cactus.

* * *

The Desert Smells Like Rain: in it I read:
The syrup from which sacred wine is made

is extracted from the saguaros each
summer. The Papagos place it in jars,

where the last of it softens, then darkens
into a color of blood though it tastes

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strangely sweet, almost white, like a dry wine.
As I tell Sameetah this, we are still

seven miles away. "And you know the flowers
of the saguaros bloom only at night?"

We are driving slowly, the road is glass.
"Imagine where we are was a sea once."

Gathering speed, I repeat, "Imagine,
just imagine!" The sky is relentlessly

sapphire, and the past is happening quickly:
the saguaros have opened themselves, stretched

out their arms to rays millions of years old,
in each ray a secret of the planet's

origin, the rays hurting each cactus
into memory, a human memory—

for they are human, the Papagos say:
not only because they have arms and veins and

secrets. But because they too are a tribe,
vulnerable to massacre. "It is like

the end, perhaps the beginning of the world,"
Sameetah says, staring at their snow-drenched

arms. And we are driving by the ocean
that evaporated here, by its shores,

the past now happening so quickly that each
stop light hurts us into memory, the sky

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taking rapid notes on us as we turn
at Tucson Boulevard and drive into

the airport, and I realize that the earth
is thawing from longing into longing and

that we are being forgotten by those arms.

* * *

At the airport I stared after her plane
till the window was

a mirror again.
As I drove back to the foothills, the fog

shut its doors behind me on Alvernon,
and I breathed the dried seas

the earth had lost,
their forsaken shores. And I remembered

another moment that refers only
to itself:

in New Delhi one night as
Begum Akhtar sang, the lights went out. It

was perhaps during the Bangladesh War,
perhaps there were sirens,

air-raid warnings.
But the audience, hushed, did not stir.

The microphone was dead, but she went on
singing, and her voice

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was coming from far
away, as if she had already died.

Like this turning darkness of the fog, it
was a moment when only

a lost sea
can be heard, a time to recollect every

shadow, everything the earth was losing,
a time to think of everything

the earth
and I had lost, of all that I would lose,

of all that I was losing.

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Sorghum

Bobbie Ann Mason

Liz woke up at three A.M., when she recognized Danny's car rumbling into the driveway. It had a hole in the muffler. Then she heard the car turn around and speed down the street. In the distance, the tires kept squealing as Danny tore up and down the streets of the subdivision. She waited for the crash, but the car returned. Again, Danny backed out of the driveway and went zooming down the street, the tires screeching. Someone will call the police, she thought, terrified.

"What's Daddy doing?" said Melissa, a little silhouette in the dim light of the bedroom doorway. She was dragging her Cabbage Patch-style doll by an arm.

"It's all right, sugar." Liz got out of bed and bent down to hug her child.

"Kiss Maretta Louise, too," Melissa said.

Liz held onto Melissa, her free hand untangling the little girl's hair. To be fair, Liz patted Maretta Louise's hair too.

"He's just having a little joy ride, sweetie," Liz said. "There's not any traffic, so he has the street all to himself."

"Daddy doesn't love Maretta Louise," Melissa said, whining. "He told her she was ugly."

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"She's not ugly! She's precious." Liz herded Melissa back to her own bed. "I'll stay in here with you," she said. "Let's be real quiet so we won't wake Michael up."

The car roared into the driveway again, and the door slammed. Danny worked the four-to-midnight shift at the tire plant, and for the past several Friday nights he had been coming in late, usually drunk. Liz worked all day at a discount store, and the only times during the week she was with Danny they were asleep. Weekends were shocking, when they saw each other awake and older. They had something like a commuter marriage, she thought, with none of the advantages. Liz didn't love Danny in the same way anymore. When he was drunk, he made love as though he were plowing corn, and she did not enjoy it.

"I'm home!" yelled Danny, bursting into the house.

On Thursday after supper, when Michael and Melissa were playing at friends' houses down the street, Liz tuned in to Sue Ann Grooms, a psychic on the radio.

"Hello. You're on the air."

A man said, "Could you tell me if I'm going to get laid off?"

"No, you're not," said Sue Ann Grooms.

"O.K.," the man said.

"Hello. You're on the air."

A woman with a thin, halting voice said, "I lost my wedding ring. Where can I go find it?"

"I see a tall building," said Sue Ann. "With a basement."

"You must mean when I worked at the courthouse."

"I'm getting a strong picture of a large building with a basement."

"Well, I'll look there then."

Sue Ann Grooms was local. Liz's brother had been in her class at school. Her show had been on for nearly a year, and people called up with money problems, family troubles, a lot of cancer operations. Sue Ann always had an answer on the tip of her tongue. It was amazing. She was right, too. Liz knew people who had called in.

Nervously, Liz dialed the radio station. She had to dial sev-

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eral times before she got through. She was put on hold, and she sat in a kitchen chair while music played in her ear. When Sue Ann Grooms said, "You're on the air," Liz jumped. Flustered, she said, "Uh—is my husband cheating on me?"

Sue Ann paused. The psychic didn't normally pause for thought. "I'm afraid the answer is yes," she said.

"Oh."

Sue Ann Grooms went into fast-forward, it seemed, on other calls. Sick babies, cancer, husbands out of work. The answers blurred together. Chills rushed over Liz. Her friend Faye, at the store, had urged Liz to go out and have adventures. Faye, who was divorced, dumped her children at her mother's on weekends and went out on dates to fancy restaurants up in Paducah. It wasn't just men Faye was after. She had an interest in the peculiar. It could be a strange old woman who raised peacocks and made her own apple butter, or a belly dancer. Faye had met a belly dancer at the Western Inn in Paducah, a woman who learned the art just to please her husband, because her navel turned him on, but then she took her show on the road. She had belly-danced her way across America, Faye said.

It was still daylight, and Liz went for a drive, wishing she had a little sports car instead of a Chevette. She passed the Holiday Inn. The marquee said WELCOME TEXACO BIGWIGS. She stopped for a fill-up at a Texaco, wondering what bigwigs would come to this little western Kentucky town. The conventions centered in Paducah, where they could buy liquor. A surly teenager gassed her up.

"Where are the bigwigs?" she asked.

"Huh?"

She explained about the Holiday Inn sign.

"I don't know." He shrugged and fumbled with the change. He didn't look retarded, just devoid of life. Liz shot out of the station. She felt a burning desire, for no one in particular, nothing she knew, but she expected it would make sense sooner or later. She slowed down at a triangle intersection on the highway where some teenagers were washing windshields for leukemia victims.

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"Why don't we go out to eat at someplace fancy sometime?" she asked Danny that weekend. Faye had been to a restaurant at the lake where the bread was baked in flower pots. The restaurant was decorated with antiques and stuffed wild animals.

"You're always wanting something we can't afford," Danny said, as he twisted open a bottle of beer. "You wanted a microwave, and now you've got it. The more you get, the more you want."

Liz started to remind him about the Oldsmobile he was longing for (his father swore by Oldsmobiles), but it took too much energy. He hauled her toward him in a rough embrace. "What have I done to you?" he asked when she pushed him away.

"Nothing."

"You're acting funny."

"I'm just frustrated. I want to go back to college and finish. I didn't finish and I think I ought to finish."

"But the two years you went didn't do you any good. There's not any jobs around here that call for college."

"I just wish I could finish what I started," she said.

He grinned, cocking his beer bottle at her. "This fellow at work says his wife went to college, and she changed one hundred percent. She changed her hair and the way she cooked and everything. He keeps looking at her picture, thinking maybe he's been tricked and she's not the same person. There's a lot of that going around," he said thoughtfully.

"Well, there's more to life than just getting by," Liz snapped. Danny looked at her strangely.

Faye had told Liz about a man who made sorghum molasses. "He's a darling old man I met at a flea market, and he makes it with all the old equipment and stuff." Liz had a craving for sorghum. She hadn't had any since she was a child. On Friday after work, she drove out to the place.

The Summer farm was five miles out in the country, near a run-down old settlement with an old-fashioned general store (peeling paint, Dr. Pepper sign). Cletus Summer lived in a new brick ranch house, with a shiny white dish antenna squat-

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ting possessively in the back yard. The outbuildings were gray and sagged with age. Near a shed, several visitors were watching the old man boiling down cane syrup in a vat. The heat from the fire beneath the vat burned Liz's face and she stepped back. This old man had been making sorghum for generations, she thought. Yet she couldn't even get Danny to grill chickens.

The vat was sectioned like a rat maze, and Cletus Summer was swooshing the fluid through the maze with a spade. Now and then he scooped foam from the surface. It was green, like pond slime.

"This is the second batch," he said to the visitors. "Yesterday I throwed away a whole batch that took all day to make. It didn't taste right. It tasted green."

"It sure looks green," Liz said.

A younger man, in a red T-shirt and a cowboy hat, said, "You're supposed to have mules walking in a circle to mash the cane. But Daddy built a machine to squeeze the juice out." He laughed. "The real old-timers don't like that, do they, Daddy?" The man wore a large brass belt buckle that said ED in large letters superimposed on crossed Confederate rifles. "Remember the time that old farmer made some hooch out of his sorghum and the pigs got into it and got drunk?"

The men howled together. The older man said, "It was 'soo-ee' all over the place! The farmer got plowed too, and he passed out in the pigpen." Viciously he kicked at a log on the fire. "Damn! Them logs ain't burning. They're plumb green."

"Everything's green here," Liz said, gazing at the slippery scum. The cane leaves strewn around on the ground were bright green.

"An old-timey sorghum-making had a picnic, and the whole neighborhood helped," Ed said, gazing straight at Liz. She decided he was good looking.

"Nowadays people ain't work brittle," the old man mumbled.

"What do you mean?" Liz asked.

"If you ain't work brittle it means you're lazy."

Later, after she had taken the gallon of sorghum she bought

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to the car and had stopped to pet some cats, Liz saw the man named Ed under a tree reading a paperback. He had a good build and a strong, craggy face. He smiled at her, a crooked smile like the label pasted on the sorghum can.

"Do you live here?" she asked. "I never saw a farmer laze around under a tree with a book before."

"No, I just came up from Memphis to help Daddy out. I've got a business there—I sell sound systems." He closed the book on his thumb. The book was about Hitler.

"I always liked sorghum on pancakes," Liz said. "But I never knew what all went into it."

"It's an education being around Daddy. He could do everything the old way. But he doesn't have to anymore." Ed glanced over at his father, who was hunched over the vat and tasting the syrup from a wooden spoon. He still seemed dissatisfied with the taste. "Daddy's getting real bad—forgetful and stuff. It's not stopping him, though. He's got a girlfriend and he still drives to town. By the way, my name's Ed."

"That's what I figured. I'm Liz."

"What's your favorite food, Liz?" he asked.

"Ice cream. Why?"

"Just asking. Who's your favorite star?"

"Sometimes Clint Eastwood. Sometimes Paul Newman."

"You want to go out with me for ice cream and then a Paul Newman movie?"

She laughed. "My husband might not like it if he found out."

Ed said, "If 'ifs' and 'buts' was candy and nuts, we'd have Christmas every day."

She laughed and he tilted his cowboy hat down over his eyes and peered out from under it flirtatiously. "What's your husband got that I ain't got?" he asked.

"I don't know. I never see him," she said, wishing she hadn't mentioned she had a husband. "We don't get along."

"Well, there you go. Come on."

In Ed's red Camaro, they headed for Paducah, on back roads, past ripening tobacco fields and corn scorching in the late summer haze. Ed was a careful driver. Liz couldn't imag-

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ine him terrorizing the neighborhood at three A.M. As the road twisted through abandoned towns, past rundown farms and shabby gas stations, Liz felt excited. It was all so easy. This was what Faye did every weekend.

"When I die, I don't want to be cremated," Ed said when they passed a small family cemetery.

"A lot of people are getting cremated now. I guess it's all right."

"My sister burnt her dog. The vet had to put it to sleep and she had it cremated. She keeps it in a milk jug on the mantel. It's antique."

Liz felt goose bumps rush over her arms. She saw herself as a character in a movie, in one of those romantic boy-meets-girl scenes. She said, "There's this new movie I want to see that has Chevy Chase in it."

"I thought he was dead."

"No, he's not."

"I can't remember what stars have died," he said.

At the mall, they priced some stereo components in a Radio Shack ("a little check on the competition," Ed said), and then they had their pictures made in Wild West costumes at a booth in the center of the mall. From a rack of old clothing, Liz selected a low-cut gown and a feather boa. She giggled at herself in the mirror as she changed behind a curtain. Ed chose a severe black hat, a string tie, a worn green jacket and wool pants with suspenders. The woman who ran the booth said, "Y'all look good. Everybody gets such a kick out of this. I guess it takes them back to a simpler time."

"If there ever *was* such a time," Ed said, nodding. As they posed for the camera, he said, "This is the seduction of Miss Jones by the itinerant preacher." Liz spotted a woman she knew across the corridor in front of a shoe store. Liz turned her head, hoping she wouldn't be recognized, while Ed filled out a form for the picture to be mailed to him in Memphis.

"Order anything you want," Ed said at a restaurant in the mall. Liz ordered Cajun chicken and a margarita. She had never had Cajun chicken. It was expensive, but she suspected

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Ed must have a lot of money. She began to relax and enjoy herself. She liked margaritas. She said, "My friend Faye at work went out to eat last week at a place where you choose your meat from a big platter they bring and then you grill it at your table. I told her I didn't see the point in going out to eat if you had to cook it yourself." She licked salt from the edge of her glass.

"Does your husband take you out to eat?"

"No. He works the four-to-midnight shift. And his idea of going out to eat is McDonald's."

"Does he make you happy?" Ed sipped his drink and stared at her.

"No," Liz said, embarrassed. "He gets drunk and he's fooling around with somebody, so what I do is none of his business." She explained about the psychic.

"I had my palm read once," he said. "There's this whole town of psychics in Florida."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I was there once and had my palm read by six different palm readers."

"What did you find out?"

"My life line is squiggly. I'm supposed to have a dangerous and unfulfilled life." He held his palm out and traced his lifeline. Liz could see the squiggle, like those back roads to Paducah.

"Do you have any kids?" she asked.

"Not exactly. I never stayed married long enough."

Liz laughed. "It doesn't take long to make kids."

"Have you got any?"

"Yeah—two, Michael and Melissa. They're eight and six. They drive me crazy but I wouldn't take anything for them."

After ordering more drinks, Ed said, "Once I saw this great little kid who played Little League. He was a perfect little guy—blond hair and blue eyes and smart as a whip. He had a good grip on that bat and he could run. You know what I did? I found his mother and married her and had an instant great kid. Somebody I could take fishing and play catch with."

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"What happened to him—and her?"

"Oh, he grew up and got in trouble. I left a long time before that."

"Tell me about yourself," she said eagerly. "I want to know everything."

He told her he had been married twice, both times to women who worked in dress stores and always looked like fashion plates. But he insisted neither of them was as good-looking as Liz. He told her she was sexy, and that he liked the way she said whatever came to mind. Feeling reckless and liberated, she began meeting Ed on occasional Friday nights throughout the late summer and fall. It was easy to get Michael and Melissa to spend Friday evenings with her parents, who got cable. Supposedly, Liz was playing cards with Faye and the girls.

Ed called her at the store on those weekends when he came up from Memphis to help his father out. Mr. Summer had a girlfriend who looked after him during the week, but she spent weekends traveling to visit her family (her husband was in jail and her son was in a mental institution). Liz and Ed met at the mall, and they usually ate something, and then Liz left her car there and went with Ed out to the Summer farm, to a small apartment Ed had fixed up in the shed where the sorghum-making equipment was stored. The place had been his clubhouse when he was a boy. The room was nice. Ed had even installed a sound system, and sonorous music Liz couldn't identify flooded the room like a church organ as they made passionate love on a single bed by the window. Liz felt happy, but the moon shining in made her shiver with the knowledge of what she was doing, as if the moon was spying on her. But she couldn't believe it mattered. She wondered what Danny would do if he found out, whether he could take the kids from her. She didn't think so. She didn't know any woman who had lost custody of her kids, especially when the father was drunk and unfaithful. Some people thought an unfaithful woman was worse, though. They expected it of men, but women were supposed to be better. Liz didn't understand this. And she

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didn't know how she could possibly leave Danny and support the kids on her own. She wished she could take her kids to Memphis and live with Ed. He had told her his apartment building had a swimming pool, and he belonged to a country club. Liz didn't know whether to believe him. His reported life style seemed far-fetched, incongruous with the old farm and the sorghum shed. But in that shed on those Friday nights, she felt her whole life take off, like a car going into fifth gear. Liz never saw Ed's father, who was alone in his small brick ranch house, watching something that soared in from outer space to his satellite dish.

One Friday in the fall, Ed told Liz he wanted to take her down to Reelfoot Lake in Tennessee the next weekend. He straightened the quilt out and brushed dirt and debris from it. He began dressing. He said, "I want to take you to the annual game dinner me and my hunting buddies have."

"But it's too far to get back by midnight."

"You could stay there. A friend of mine has a house on the lake."

"Danny would find out." She couldn't see Ed's face in the dark. He was by the window, pulling on his boots, with one foot propped on a sorghum can.

He said, "I wouldn't care if he did, except he might come after me and blow my head off."

"He's not very big," said Liz, buttoning her blouse. "He's not as big as you are. But I'm afraid. I don't know what I'm getting into with you."

"Well, I don't know what I'm getting into with you either," Ed said, buckling his ED belt. "But we'll have a good time down at Reelfoot. This game dinner's something. We'll have duck and all kinds of game—possum, coon, bunny-rabbit, armadillo . . . "

"Oh, you're teasing!" she cried. "You're such a kidder."

"But you come down with me. It's a tradition, one of those things that's supposed to mean something."

On Thursday night, Liz stayed up late to speak to Danny when he got in. She had ignored his Friday night sprees, not

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wanting to pick a fight with him. As he shed his work clothes, tossing them into the laundry basket, she said, "I might not be here when you come in tomorrow night."

"Why not?"

"I'm going with Faye to this place down in Tennessee where you can go to a mall that's nothing but factory outlets." It was true that there was such a mall, and Faye had been there. "It's so far we thought we'd go down Friday night and stay with this friend of Faye's." Liz had worked out this story with Faye.

"Fine," Danny said. "If you can get a good price on some 501 jeans, I need a pair."

"O.K.," said Liz. "I'll look." She suddenly realized Danny had gained weight—maybe ten pounds.

After work, Liz left her car at the train depot in Fulton and Ed met her there. He looked handsome in a green blazer and tie printed with geese in flight. She was nervous about meeting his friends. "Wow, look at Miss America," he said after they had stopped at a gas station for her to change clothes. She had brought her clothes in tote bags instead of a suitcase, to avoid suspicion.

"I never get to dress up," Liz said, pleased. "But I love this dress and I got it on sale."

By the time Reelfoot Lake came into view, the sun was setting and Liz was hungry. Ed slowed down and said, "Look at that lake. Can you imagine the earthquake that made that lake—way back yonder? They say we're due for another one."

"I hope it's not this weekend," Liz said. "That's what I always thought about going to California—it would be just my luck for it to hit when I was there. If there was an earthquake here this weekend, it would be to punish me. Maybe I should have called up Sue Ann Grooms."

Ed reached for her hand. "Don't be nervous," he said.

"Don't you get nervous when you're on the verge of something?"

"Verge of what?"

"I don't know. I just feel like something's going to happen."

"I always feel like I'm on the verge of something," said Ed.

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"Well, you've done a lot and you've got a lot to show for it."

"I can't complain. I made it off the farm, and that's something."

"Are you happy?" she asked.

"Happy?"

"Have you got what you want?"

"Nobody ever gets all they want," he said. "Everybody's always dissatisfied. The sad thing is, money ain't everything."

Liz said, "It's not everything, but it helps."

Ed turned into a narrow dirt road by the lake. "We're just about there," he said. "Joe's country house is real nice. Speaking of money, he made his off of women's hats, in Memphis." He laughed. "His store is called 'Le Chateau Chapeau.'"

"Is he rich?" cried Liz. "I've never been around people with money. I won't know how to act."

"Oh, he's not really rich," Ed assured her.

"Will they have finger bowls? They're rich if they've got finger bowls. And a lot of forks." She giggled.

Ed laughed. "You've been watching too much 'Dynasty.'"

"Yes, they *are* rich," Liz said when she saw the house. "I know what lakefront property goes for! I bet that house cost a hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"Hey, it's O.K.," Ed said. "For one thing, you're younger and better looking than anybody here. Just remember that. They'll all be jealous."

It was a two-story chalet-style house with large windows. Ed led Liz inside, on the basement level, where there was a wet bar. Several people in subdued, tasteful clothing were standing around, drinking and laughing. Liz had worn her loud red dress—Faye's idea. As she was introduced, Liz felt out of place and all the names instantly escaped her. When Ed had kissed her in the car, his shaving lotion was strong, like something from Christmas, and he seemed warm and familiar. But in this classy house, plunging into hunting talk with his buddies, he was a stranger. For all she knew, Ed could be a drug dealer.

"Margarita?" Ed asked, and Liz nodded.

With her drink, Liz explored the house. A woman named Nancy showed her around. Liz figured out that she was the

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owner's wife. "We haven't had this much company in months," Nancy said, laughing. "I'm so proud!"

"That's a pretty love seat," Liz murmured. She wondered what it cost. It was Wedgewood-blue velvet, with white wood trim. In her house, the kids would spill something on it within ten minutes.

"We bought that love seat to celebrate our tenth anniversary," Nancy said. "Ten years and still in love! We thought it was romantic." She laughed giddily and sipped something pale from a long-stemmed glass. "But we're romantic fools," she said. "When our son was born, in 1979, I wrote a whole book of poems! They just came pouring out, while I was in the hospital. We got a friend of ours who's a printer to print them up. It turned out real nice."

Liz combed her hair in a luxurious gold-and-beige bathroom large enough to dance in. She set her drink on a long marble counter. Next to a greenhouse window—with huge hanging fuchsias and airplane plants—was a Jacuzzi sunken into the floor. Liz had never seen a hot tub before. The water was bubbling, steaming up the windows of the greenhouse. It was dark outside now, but she could dimly make out the tall cypress trees standing in the lake like gigantic wading birds. She hurried out of the bathroom, wobbling on her high heels. She suddenly had the scary thought that the guests were going to strip naked and get in that hot tub together. Otherwise, why would it be heated up? She had heard about orgies among trendy sets of people.

Liz found Ed in the den, talking to a short fat man wearing a dinner jacket made of camouflage material. The den had shelves and shelves of wooden duck decoys, lined up, all facing the same way. Liz expected them to move, the way they did at the carnival. She felt like pitching baseballs at them.

"I've been collecting these little babies for twenty years," said the man in the camouflage jacket to the guests gathered around him. For several minutes, he narrated the history of the duck decoys, pointing out which ones were antiques.

"Hey, Ed. That's a good-looking gal you've got there with you," he said suddenly. His voice sounded off-key, like an artificial voice from a mechanical box.

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"I think I'll keep her," Ed said, grinning. "Joe, meet Liz. This is Joe Callaway. This is his house. Joe and me go way back."

"Nice to meet you," Liz said. "I've been talking to your wife. She showed me around."

In front of a gun rack, Ed said to Liz, "What's wrong? You look funny."

"Nothing. I'm just nervous."

"You're fine," he said, patting her on the behind.

"I guess I expected a lot of mannequins in hats—not ducks. That jacket's a scream. My kid has some jeans made out of that material."

At the dinner table—two forks, no finger bowls—Liz sat between Ed and Joe and across from a man in a black curly wig that sat on his head askew. A small pink plastic goose marked each place setting, and the centerpiece of the table was an enormous duck decoy resting on a bed of cabbage leaves, the curly kind. The duck had artificial flowers sprouting out of holes in its back and a smug expression. Liz noticed a woman using her fingers to pick out the cherries in her fruit cocktail, and she realized that if you had enough money it didn't matter how you behaved. The thought was comforting, and it made her feel a little reckless. Maybe if Liz used bad manners, they would just think she was being original. The woman eating with her fingers wore a derby hat and reminded Liz of Susan St. James on "Kate & Allie." There were five men and five women at the table, and Liz couldn't keep their names straight because most of them reminded her of someone else. Then she almost shrieked as she turned to face a platter of little birds, posed exactly like tiny roast turkeys. They were quail.

"Welcome to our critter dinner," Nancy said to Liz. "It's a tradition. We've been doing this every duck season for ten years."

Liz had forgotten what Ed said about the game dinner. Several dishes circulated, and Ed served Liz, plopping something from each one on her plate.

"We've got everything but rattlesnake here," Ed said, smiling.

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"I think I've got some of that on my plate," joked a man who had said he owned his own bush-hog rental company.

"Most of it's out of season, but we freeze it and then the women fix it up and we have everything at once," Ed explained to Liz.

"I was cooking all day on this rabbit," the woman in the hat said. "It was so tough I must have used a quart of tenderizer."

"It tastes just divine, Cindy," said Nancy. Earlier, Nancy had passed around souvenir tie tacs for the men—little silver ducks in flight. She gave the women oven mitts in the shape of fish. Liz had seen them in craft stores and they were worth ten dollars. She stuffed hers in her purse. An irresistible bargain from a housewares outlet—fifty cents, she would tell Danny.

"What's this?" Liz asked, when a dish of something that looked like cat paws reached her.

"Possum," Joe said. "I claim credit for that."

"They say you have to trap a possum and feed it milk for ten days before you butcher it," the woman in the hat, Cindy, said. "Did you do that, Joe?"

"Hell, no, I just blasted it out of my sycamore tree out front." He whooped, a clown guffaw.

"Possum's gamy, but you acquire a taste for it," said the woman who was with the man in the wig. Her hair looked real.

The goose had a cream sauce on it; the duck was cooked with cherries and felt leathery; the quail was stuffed with liver; the rabbit seemed to be pickled. Liz stared at her plate. Ed was discussing duck calls with the bush-hog man. The women chattered about someone's custom-made drapes.

The bush-hog man's wife, who looked older than he did, said to Liz, "Don't you just hate it when somebody says they'll come out to work on something and you stay home and then they don't show up?"

"Excuse me," Liz said, rising. "I'll be right back."

Her face burned red. Everyone at the table looked at her. In the large bathroom she tried to throw up, but she had been too excited all day to eat. Her face in the mirror was younger. The wrinkles under her eyes had plumped out, as her new eye cream had promised. She looked young, innocent. If she

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dropped dead of a heart attack—or lead poisoning from eating buckshot—and Danny found out where she was, what would he make of it?

She clutched a gold towel-rack, trying to steady herself. She stared hard in the mirror at the person she had become for the evening, in the red dress Faye had recommended. It was like a whore dress, she thought. Danny was right about the way she always wanted something she didn't have. What did she really want? She didn't know. She didn't want to lose her kids. She didn't want to stay with Danny. She *would* like a hot tub—but she didn't need any duck decoys. She would not have paid even fifty cents for that fish mitt.

The assorted dishes at the dinner reminded her of a picture she saw once of a vase of flowers, impossible combinations: pansies, irises, daisies, zinnias, roses, an unlikely mixture of flowers throughout the seasons, from the early spring hyacinths to the fall asters. The arrangement was beautiful, but it was something you could never see in real life. That was the way she thought of life with Ed, in a house like this—something grand that could never materialize.

The greenhouse windows were steamy and the hanging plants dripped moisture. The whirling water in the tub sounded like the ocean. Liz wished she could go to the ocean, just once in her life. That was one thing she truly wanted. She checked the lock on the door and slipped out of her shoes. She laid her purse on the counter next to the sink and carefully removed her stockings and dress. She touched her toe in the hot water. It seemed too hot to bear but she decided she would bear it—like a punishment, or an acquired taste, that would turn delicious when she was used to it.

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Two Poems by Mary Campbell

Drugs

Coffee: the tightening at the heart,
The wreath of ice, like thorns
Arranged there to give pleasure,
The interpenetration of the nerves
And mind, until thought
Bites at your breast—keen lover
Or gourmand to a sentient peach.

A little later in life, not much,
Cold beer ungirdles that tight
Garland, turns the nerves to rivers,
Gives them sense of their own
Latent, riotous joyfulness, as if
They were in bed in fact, always in beds,
And by them willows loosing their long hair.

And oh, the cigarette: beyond
These sexual illusions, the pure bliss
Of smoke loved for its own sake,
The moment at which the body of man,
Alone among the animals,
Finds itself satisfied by nothing,
Or by a desire crafted to fulfill
A source of satisfaction.

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The Loneliness of Men Bathing

No one bothers to imagine men in baths.
None of us sitting home alone
On a dull, rainy evening
Thinks of the nude male body
Half-floating, eyes closed, in scented water
Littered with petals, loosening himself
Into the liquid grace of muscular abandon,
One arm perhaps draped over the bath's edge
Beckoning unconsciously, the left hand
Drawing a long, slow line along
The silkened, opened, underwater skin
Of an upper thigh until it reaches
Tactile complications at the loins
And just gets lost.

The lovely self-involvement of this wet
Body, slightly stirring, aromatic
Weightless, gorgeous, given up to pleasure
Is no secret, but still the event
Goes unattended, night after night
Year after year.
People imagine something else; men rise
From dirty, unimagined water
Put on an old bathrobe
Make tea and clip their nails
Without so much applause
As a single caught breath
Or pair of widened eyes.

O fragrant, oiled Odysseus, O Marat
Interrupted, O Bloom in your indolent tub
O Christ in heaven and your feet
In Mary Magdalene's hair, forgive me!
Think of me, from now on, thinking of you—
Vigilant, breathless, crazy with desire.

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Two Poems By Charlie Smith

The Banquet

I went down to Missolonihgi
with my oldest friend—this was a long time ago—
and we visited Byron's house,
which is the color of biscuits
and smaller and shabbier than I imagined it would be,
and I thought of the way he let himself die,
how he just gave in to all the misery
he had caused himself
and so many of those who had loved him,
and it was meaningless
to me I was agitated,
falling out of love with my friend
who was my lover
and the lover of the woman who had left me
the year before. We stopped at a restaurant on the highway
and stood a moment looking at the tan and yellow
shabby grasses blowing
on the hillside, and they looked as if they were heading
somewhere, toward at least
the gray olive trees among the rocks. Inside
a squat man, still young, led us from our table
to a banquet of dishes
laid out on a counter, pointing out the fish
and the wreathed, oozing meats
as if they were jewels proposed for a noble's inspection.
He had lived ten years in New York
and as he spoke of this I saw there was a sadness
in him, but I couldn't tell whether it was the sadness
of something lost, or of something
not attempted. We were not interested in food
and ordered without flair,

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and I saw this disappointed him and was sorry
but did nothing about it; we ourselves
were sad and nearly hysterical, bitter
over the loss of our love, and we ate
without speaking to each other. I watched the man
sitting at a small table in the corner
folding napkins, and the expressions
that passed over his face—of grief, of anger and envy—
seemed to have lives of their own,
as if they only used the flesh of him
for passage, like pilgrims stepping from stone to stone
crossing a river. For a second I almost saw
the way we are all related
as vessels or means for whatever it is
that charges through this world,
and I started to say I
almost could say, but my friend
tapped my hand and told me to pay the bill,
and I got up and followed him out
into the blazeless, empty day
and into the feckless sorrow and stupidity of our passion.

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Cycles

I think it is well known now
how you can take one part of the country
and re-erect it somewhere else, how the abrupt, snow-
streaked
mountains of New Mexico hang in a dark corner
of your uncle's hall. And some mornings in late winter
the trees are diadems of ice,
the way they were once, miraculously, on the river in
Florida,
when you were a child. It is not
that we wish the courage
to ask a co-worker
for the loan of her beach house, it is not
that. Or the mad woman,
slick with terror and grease, interrupting mass—
that something in here
would take hold suddenly, and calm her. O the priests
do their duty
because they are pros. And the world
was always crumbling fast; it is not that we wish the world
other than it is. My friend asks
what's your hurry? we are all headed
to the grave. Only, I guess,
I seek a certain rhythm, the dumb bob
of a pigeon's head, the old friend
calling from Kansas, the muck of love—
its resignation and exuberance—the red flowers
returned to the trees
as if winter was nothing to them, nothing at all.

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Marilyn Hacker

Dear Jool, I Miss You in St. Saturnin

You mocked me that hot day at Carcassonne,
"We're *tourists* now!" waving the green Michelin.
We'd come to meet your old pals from Tucson—

yards tall, blond, Woolrich-trousered, Aryan.
They wanted dinner well before sunset,
and, sure enough, they were vegetarian

so I negotiated them an omelette
someplace where we could have our cassoulet.
You'd hiked loved hills with her, as dry and hot

as the Autoroute you drove all day
to bring old friend and newer one together.
Home was just a postal code away

a village on a hilltop we would rather
the Michelin never noticed. For a while
home. You came here first with Jean, your mother,

after a voyage meant to reconcile
whom adolescence and divorce divided.
Her white dress plunged to suntanned back, a style

you'd never wear, but picked for her. Your pride did
show, and she mirrored it. I'd been alone,
felt like an orphan, though I tried to hide it.

Then, with my daughter and your mother gone,
you tacked your worksheets to your bedroom walls.
We shaped our hours to work and silence, nun-

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like, we thought. Wind chimed matins, and birdcalls
vespers that pealed us to the kitchen where
we cooked our day's rewards. The waterfalls

near Mas Audran were yours, the vineyards were
mine—to walk around. The air was gold
with broom, and grape-leaf, plane-tree green, the air

was blue blue blue July. With wine, we told
each other that we'd be old ladies on
a hill like this, where people still got old

in housedresses and navy cardigans
or patriotic azure salopettes.
We'd gossip French and write American.

Our vegetarian compatriates
caught us up on reviews, tenure, careers
and marriages. We smoked French cigarettes

and ordered brandy. They had two more beers.
I stacked ashes around my coffee-cup, ill
with sociability. Maverick queer,

maverick straight: two singles to their couple:
I'm sure that the comparison occurred
to both of us. We found the going uphill

worth it, if our hill was the vineyard-
and-orchard-covered slope we'd re-ascend
laden with cèpes and confit de canard.

That was three years ago this month. I send
this from one of the wine-veined valley towns
that shone like firefly cages at the end

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of day from our roof-terrace. Dusk around
them glowed. We called them "Cities of the Plain"
because it was unsuitable, choked down

our drinks guessing what might be mortal sin
to garrulous hard-working villagers.
We hoped it had to do with doctored wine.

My love is here and mine and I am hers.
Iva is elsewhere, utterly thirteen.
Jean could have told me, "Daughters!" And mothers . . .

This ought to be an elegy for Jean
who came back on last furlough from what grew
in her, from pain, to see you fitted in

the satin gown she wore at twenty-two.
This should be an epithalamion,
but is for solitudes shared in the blue

vat of Meridional air: for you.

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Jonathan Galassi

The Lake

If we could see the lake someday without
the heaviness the clouds are always casting
in pewter ridges, would there be a doubt
our temporary life is everlasting?
Our temporary life, the one with days
and weather and a future made of same,
of springtimes, noontimes, new beginnings, ends,
till we don't see the water for itself,
the image for the thing that isn't there:
not the towel on the plastic chair,
not the paddle propped on the canoe,
or the trout at sunset rising to
the bait of a mosquito,
but everything that these and we suggest:
ideas, forms, abstractions, qualities
that hover somewhere over them like haze.

There's a cold morning shadow from the trees
that you swim out of, heading for the sun.
Light on the crest of the water plays and plays
when you break the seal of the surface with your hand
to shatter an appearance, recreate
a chaos, as your arm sinks in the lake
like teeth in meat, the way the element
partly resists and partially gives in
and you move forward on the difference,
leaving a wake of diamonds, froth and noise
that lasts an instant, which is comforting
or chastening, depending on your mood.
But who could want to leave a name in water?
What's brilliant is your interplay with sun,

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the crystal palaces, *jeux d'eaux*,
animated sculptures and light shows
you make up through a little mutual
exertion, with no thought of shape or sense.
Lie back and kick, the others do the rest,
the golden rainbows fall across your chest,
and their distinction's their impermanence.

Back on the dock you're back in the world of shadow:
dew on the chairs and darkness in the trees
where life, that made so much
commotion in the trash last night, is lurking.
The critters think the world belongs to them
and maybe it does:
you can shine a light in the lake at night
and see the snakes arrow out from the dock,
trying to disappear
so our world won't intersect with theirs.
Nature is crowded: every inch
crawls with crossed imperatives.
Listen and you'll hear the little death cries
salt what you thought was silence.
No wonder everything resembles something
else, no wonder waves across the water
read like a message broadcast from the core
till every story
is an allegory,
and unforgiving afternoons
when everything the soul is not
gathers in a livid knot
over water black with clouds that loom
(clouds that are saying something, only what?)
face it: there are no things but in ideas,
and the whole world is this empty room.

But here in the blond morning
who remembers yesterday's storm?
Fred is out taking the boat for a run, a few

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canoes and colored sails are making background.
Everything's intent on being warm,
everything we see bespeaks enjoyment.
The water's gentle changeability
is constant, a release from entropy,
a way of blocking all the messages
or else a gathering of messages
into a tutti: endless rise-and-fall
and come-and-go, all one, all one, all one . . .
Yet the pale imagination
colors at the thought of something brighter
and more abundant than this given world:
the blueberries just dropping on the water,
so many birds the silence terrifies,
and the drinkable lake, so pure your hand is bigger
and broader in it, purer
with pure blood running in untrammeled veins.

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On Inspiration

Next year the Viking Press will publish A Writer's Chapbook, *a volume composed of extracts from the series of interviews with authors which have appeared in this magazine since 1953. The extracts have been reordered under various headings (Plot, Character, Style, Stimulant Devices, Teaching Programs, and so forth). What follows are the authors' discussions on the first stirrings, the germination of a poem or a work of fiction. Any number of headings would be appropriate:* Beginnings, The Starting Point, *etc.* Inspiration *would be as good as any.* —G.A.P.

An idea might occur to me, something very banal—for example, isn't it strange that it is possible to both talk and think at the same time? That might be an idea for a poem. Or certain words or phrases might have come to my attention with a meaning I wasn't aware of before. Also, I often put in things that I have overheard people say, on the street for instance. Suddenly something fixes itself in the flow that is going on around one and seems to have a significance. In fact, there is an example of that in this poem, "What Is Poetry." In a bookstore I overheard a boy saying to a girl this last line: "It might give us—what?—some flowers soon?" I have no idea what the context was, but it suddenly seemed the way to end my poem.

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I am a believer in fortuitous accidents. The ending of my poem "Clepsydra," the last two lines, came from a notebook that I kept a number of years before, during my first trip to Italy. I actually wrote some poems while I was traveling, which I don't usually do, but I was very excited by my first visit there. So years later, when I was trying to end "Clepsydra" and getting very nervous, I happened to open that notebook and found these two lines that I had completely forgotten about: "while morning is still and before the body / Is changed by the faces of evening." They were just what I needed at that time. But it doesn't really matter so much what the individual thing is. Many times I will jot down ideas and phrases, and then when I am ready to write I can't find them. But it doesn't make any difference, because whatever comes along at that time will have the same quality. Whatever was there is replaceable. In fact, often in revising I will remove the idea that was the original stimulus. I think I am more interested in the movement among ideas than in the ideas themselves, the way one goes from one point to another rather than the destination or the origin.

—John Ashbery

Different books start in different ways. I sometimes wish that I were the kind of writer who begins with a passionate interest in a character and then, as I've heard other writers say, just gives that character elbow room and sees what he or she wants to do. I'm not that kind of writer. Much more often I start with a shape or form, maybe an image. The floating showboat, for example, which became the central image in *The Floating Opera,* was a photograph of an actual showboat I remember seeing as a child. It happened to be named *Captain Adams' Original Unparalleled Floating Opera,* and when nature, in her heavy-handed way, gives you an image like that, the only honorable thing to do is to make a novel out of it. This may not be the most elevated of approaches. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, for example, comes to the medium of fiction with a high moral purpose; he wants, literally, to try to change

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the world through the medium of the novel. I honor and admire that intention, but just as often a great writer will come to his novel with a much less elevated purpose than wanting to undermine the Soviet government. Henry James wanted to write a book in the shape of an hourglass. Flaubert wanted to write a novel about *nothing*. What I've learned is that the muses' decision to sing or not to sing is not based on the elevation of your moral purpose—they will sing or not, regardless.

—John Barth

I suppose that all of us have a primitive prompter or commentator within who from earliest years has been advising us, telling us what the real world is. There is such a commentator in me. I have to prepare the ground for him. From this source come words, phrases, syllables; sometimes only sounds, which I try to interpret, sometimes whole paragraphs, fully punctuated. When E. M. Forster said, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" he was perhaps referring to his own prompter. There is that observing instrument in us—in childhood at any rate. At the sight of a man's face, his shoes, the color of light, a woman's mouth or perhaps her ear, one receives a word, a phrase, at times nothing but a nonsense-syllable from the primitive commentator.

—Saul Bellow

The question after the *The Dream Songs* was whether I would ever again attempt a long poem, and I thought it improbable, so I didn't expect to write any more verse.

But suddenly one day last winter I wrote down a line: "I fell in love with a girl." I looked at it, and I couldn't find anything wrong with it. I thought, "God damn it, that is a *fact*." I felt, as a friend of mine says, "comfortable with that." And I looked at it until I thought of a second line, and then a third line, and then a fourth line, and that was a stanza. Unrhymed. And the more I looked at it, the better I liked it, so I wrote a second stanza. And then I wrote some more stanzas, and you

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know what? I had a lyric poem, and a very good one. I didn't know I had it in me! Well, the next day I knocked out a stanza, changed various lines, this and that, but pretty soon it looked classical. As classical as one of the *Rubáiyát* poems—without the necessities of rhyme and meter, but with its own necessities. I thought it was as good as any of my early poems, and some of them are quite good; most of them are not, but some are. Moreover, it didn't resemble any verse I had ever written in my entire life, and moreover, the subject was entirely new, solely and simply myself. Nothing else. A subject on which I am an expert. Nobody can contradict me.* I believe strongly in the authority of learning. The reason Milton is the greatest English poet except for Shakespeare is because of the authority of his learning. I am a scholar in certain fields, but the subject on which I am a real authority is me, so I wiped out all the disguises and went to work. In about five or six weeks I had what was obviously a book called *Love & Fame.*

I had forty-two poems and was ready to print them, but they were so weird, so unlike all my previous work, that I was a little worried. I had encouragement from one or two friends, but still I didn't know what to do. I had previously sent the first poem to Arthur Crook at the *Times Literary Supplement.* He was delighted with it and sent me a proof. I, in turn, was delighted that he liked the poem, so I corrected the proof and sent him five more—I didn't want the poem to appear alone. So he printed the six, which made up a whole page—very nice typographically—and this was further encouragement. But I still wasn't sure. Meanwhile, I was in the hospital. I was a nervous wreck. I had lost nineteen pounds in five weeks and had been drinking heavily—a quart a day. So I had my publisher in New York, Giroux, xerox a dozen copies, which I sent out to friends of mine around the country for opinions. It was a weird thing to do—I've never heard of anybody else doing it—but I did it, looking for reassurance, confirmation, wanting criticism, and so on, and I got some very good criticism. Dick Wilbur took "Shirley & Auden," one of the most impor-

*Delusion (J. B., March 1971).

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tant lyrics in Part I—some of the poems are quite slight, and others are very ambitious—and gave it hell. And I agreed—I adopted almost every suggestion.

I also got some confirmation and reassurance, but there were other opinions as well. Edmund Wilson, for whose opinion I have a high regard, found the book hopeless. He said there were some fine lines and striking passages. How do you like that? It is like saying to a beautiful woman, "I like your left small toenail; that's very nice indeed," while she's standing there stark naked looking like Venus. I was deeply hurt by that letter. And then other responses were very strange. Mark Van Doren, my teacher, an old, old friend and a wonderful judge of poetry, also wrote. I forget exactly what he said, but he was very heavy on it. He said things like "original," and "will be influential," and "will be popular," and so on, but "will also be feared and hated." What a surprising letter! It took me days to get used to it, and it took me days even to see what he meant. But now I see what he means. Some of the poems are threatening, very threatening to some readers, no doubt about it. Just as some people find me threatening—to be in a room with me drives them crazy. And then there is a good deal of obscenity in the poems, too. And there is a grave piety in the last poems, which is going to trouble a lot of people. You know, the country is full of atheists, and they really are going to find themselves threatened by those poems. *The Saturday Review* printed five of them, and I had a lot of mail about them—again expressing a wide variety of opinion. Some people were just purely grateful for my having told them how to put what they'd felt for years. Then there are others who detest them—they don't call them insincere, but they just can't believe them.

—John Berryman

Let's call it *embullo*, a Cuban word that means easy eagerness, a particularly gracious way of climbing on the bandwagons of the mind. I write every time the Holy Ghost whispers some sweet something in my ear. Of course I also

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write to meet deadlines, but that's not really writing. Sometimes it comes just because I sit down at the typewriter.

—**Guillermo Cabrera Infante**

You see a school bus going along out there and you wonder where it's heading. Then you imagine a school, and a teacher. Well, who is this teacher? What is she like? Does she lead an interesting life? Then you recall some of the teachers that you had in the past. So it keeps on going and going.

—**Erskine Caldwell**

I invariably have the illusion that the whole play of a story, its start and middle and finish, occur in my mind simultaneously—that I'm seeing it in one flash. But in the working-out, the writing-out, infinite surprises happen. Thank God, because surprise, the twist, the phrase that comes at the right moment out of nowhere, is the unexpected dividend, that joyful little push that keeps a writer going.

At one time I used to keep notebooks with outlines for stories. But I found doing this somehow deadened the idea in my imagination. If the notion is good enough, if it truly belongs to *you*, then you can't forget it . . . it will haunt you till it's written.

—**Truman Capote**

Often I don't know the real origin. I had an odd experience lately which gave me a glimpse of the process, something I hadn't suspected. I was going round Manhattan on a steamer with an American friend, Elizabeth Lawrence, of Harper's. And I noticed a girl sitting all by herself on the other side of the deck—a girl of about thirty, wearing a shabby skirt. She was enjoying herself. A nice expression, with a wrinkled forehead, a good many wrinkles. I said to my friend, "I could write about that girl—what do you think she is?" Elizabeth said that

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she might be a school teacher taking a holiday, and asked me why I wanted to write about her. I said I didn't really know—I imagined her as sensitive and intelligent, and up against it. Having a hard life but making something of it, too. In such a case I often make a note. But I didn't—and I forgot the whole episode. Then, about three weeks later, in San Francisco, I woke up one night at four—I am not so much a bad sleeper as a short sleeper—I woke up, I say, with a story in my head. I sketched the story at once—it was about an English girl in England—a purely English tale. Next day an appointment fell through and I had a whole day on my hands. I found my notes and wrote the story—that is, the chief scenes and some connecting tissue. Some days later, in a plane—ideal for writing—I began to work it over, clean it up, and I thought, why all these wrinkles, that's the third time they come in. And I suddenly realised that my English heroine was the girl on the Manhattan boat. Somehow she had gone down into my subconscious, and came up again with a full-sized story.

—Joyce Cary

If you're trying as a storyteller to establish some rapport with your reader, you don't open by telling him that you have a headache and indigestion and that you picked up a gravelly rash at Jones Beach. One of the reasons is that advertising in magazines is much more common today than it was twenty to thirty years ago. In publishing in a magazine you are competing against girdle advertisements, travel advertisements, nakedness, cartoons, even poetry. The competition almost makes it hopeless. There's a stock beginning that I've always had in mind. Someone is coming back from a year in Italy on a Fulbright Scholarship. His trunk is opened in customs, and instead of his clothing and souvenirs, they find the mutilated body of an Italian seaman, everything there but the head. Another opening sentence I often think of is, "The first day I robbed Tiffany's it was raining." Of course, you can open a short story that way, but that's not how one should function with fiction. One is tempted because there has been a genuine

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loss of serenity, not only in the reading public, but in all our lives. Patience, perhaps, or even the ability to concentrate. At one point when television first came in no one was publishing an article that couldn't be read during a commercial. But fiction is durable enough to survive all of this. I don't like the short story that starts out "I'm about to shoot myself," or "I'm about to shoot you." Or the Pirandello thing of "I'm going to shoot you or you are going to shoot me, or we are going to shoot someone, maybe each other." Or the erotic thing, either, "He started to undo his pants, but the zipper stuck . . . he got the can of three-in-one oil . . ." and on and on we go.

—John Cheever

I remember when I was in Okinawa and the war was over and we went out to one of the invasion beaches near Buckner Bay, me and my co-flyers, and we went swimming and there was an old amtrack there in ten feet of water that the Japanese had stove in—big holes in the sides of it—and I swam down and sat in the driver's seat. That image stayed with me and years later, twenty or twenty-five years later, I wrote "The Driver."

—James Dickey

What's so hard about that first sentence is that you're stuck with it. Everything else is going to flow out of that sentence. And by the time you've laid down the first *two* sentences, your options are all gone.

Yes, and the last sentence in a piece is another adventure. It should open the piece up. It should make you go back and start reading from page one. That's how it *should* be, but it doesn't always work. I think of writing anything at all as a kind of highwire act. The minute you start putting words on paper you're eliminating possibilities. Unless you're Henry James.

I suppose that's part of the dynamic. I start a book and I want to make it perfect, want it to turn every color, want it to

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be the world. Ten pages in, I've already blown it, limited it, made it less, marred it. That's very discouraging. I hate the book at that point. After a while I arrive at an accommodation: well, it's not the ideal, it's not the perfect object I wanted to make, but maybe—if I go ahead and finish it anyway—I can get it right next time. Maybe I can have another chance.

—Joan Didion

Well, it can be anything. It can be a voice, an image; it can be a deep moment of personal desperation. For instance, with *Ragtime* I was so desperate to write something, I was facing the wall of my study in my house in New Rochelle and so I started to write about the wall. That's the kind of day we sometimes have, as writers. Then I wrote about the house that was attached to the wall. It was built in 1906, you see, so I thought about the era and what Broadview Avenue looked like then: trolley cars ran along the avenue down at the bottom of the hill; people wore white clothes in the summer to stay cool. Teddy Roosevelt was President. One thing led to another and that's the way that book began, through desperation to those few images. With *Loon Lake*, in contrast, it was just a very strong sense of place, a heightened emotion when I found myself in the Adirondacks after many, many years of being away . . . and all this came to a point when I saw a sign, a road sign: Loon Lake. So it can be anything. . . . I liked the sound of the two words together—loon lake. I had these opening images of a private railroad train on a single track at night going up through the Adirondacks with a bunch of gangsters on board, and a beautiful girl standing, naked, holding a white dress up in front of a mirror to see if she should put it on. I didn't know where these gangsters came from. I knew where they were going—to this rich man's camp. Many years ago the very wealthy discovered the wilderness in the American eastern mountains. They built these extraordinary camps—C. W. Post, Harriman, Morgan—they made the wilderness their personal luxury. So I imagined a camp like this, with these gang-

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sters, these lowdown people going up there on a private railroad train. That's what got me started. I published this material in the *Kenyon Review*, but I wasn't through. I kept thinking about the images and wondering where they'd come from. The time was in the 1930s, really the last era a man would have had his own railroad car, as some people today have their own jetliners. There was a depression then, so the person to see this amazing train was obviously a hobo, a tramp. So then I had my character, Joe, out there in this chill, this darkness, seeing the headlamp of the engine coming around the bend and blinding him, and then as the train goes by seeing these people at green baize tables being served drinks and this girl standing in a bedroom compartment holding the dress. And at dawn he follows the track in the direction the train has gone. And he's off and running, and so am I.

—E. L. Doctorow

I remember the day when I started *A Singular Man*. I was sitting in the sunroom of a house out in the west of Ireland, near Clifden in County Galway, and out my window I could see the Atlantic. I was in the middle of my litigations with the Olympia Press over *The Ginger Man* then and I could see the mailman on his bicycle on the winding mountain road coming to me four hours before he arrived, and I'd sit and wonder what bad news he had for me.

I think it must have been the glamor of America, the glamor of New York, as opposed to the isolation and poverty of Ireland that started me on the book. There was a cemetery just over a couple of fields where there were no gravestones. When anyone was buried they'd just pile some boulders on the grave. There were no markings, nothing. One was so isolated out there that I remember that day when the local farmer came rushing across the lawn, pointing up to the sky, and yelling, "There's a dog up there." My two children, Philip and Karen, were playing in front of the house. I remember warning my wife that the children should be pulled inside because

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there was a maniac wandering around. I was struck with terror. I had no contact with the outside world and no way of knowing the Russians had sent a dog up in a spaceship. In Ireland when you buy a newspaper, as often as not they put a recent cover on it, but inside will be an old, old, newspaper. They think news is news and vintage news is better than anything. Indeed, in Ireland, to read a local paper that's 50 years old is not much different than reading today's. In that kind of isolation *A Singular Man* came into being.

—J. P. Donleavy

It's simply a sort of premonitory sense that one day one was going to put one's whole shoulder behind a particular punch. But one had to be patient and wait and let it [*The Quartets*] form up, and not catch it in the early jelly stage before it had set properly, and ruin it by a premature thing. That explains why I have hung around in the Foreign Service for so long—keeping the machine running by writing other sorts of things, but waiting patiently, and now I suddenly felt this was it, and this was the moment, and bang—at least I hope, bang.

—Lawrence Durrell

You begin, I suppose, the way all storytellers begin. Remember, a biography is a narrative, and the biographer has a story to tell. Inside the mind there is the classical beginning: "Once upon a time . . ." In my Thoreau, I found my first sentence an expression of my thematic sense of Thoreau's narcissism. I began something like this: "Of the creative spirits that fluorished in Concord, Massachusetts, it might be said that Hawthorne loved men but felt estranged from them, Emerson loved ideas even more than men, and Thoreau loved himself." A cruel beginning, but I think the reader wants to go right on.

—Leon Edel

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[*The Sound and the Fury*] began with a mental picture. I didn't realize at the time it was symbolical. The picture was of the muddy seat of a little girl's drawers in a pear tree, where she could see through a window where her grandmother's funeral was taking place and report what was happening to her brothers on the ground below. By the time I explained who they were and what they were doing and how her pants got muddy, I realized it would be impossible to get all of it into a short story and that it would have to be a book. And then I realized the symbolism of the soiled pants, and that image was replaced by the one of the fatherless and motherless girl climbing down the rainpipe to escape from the only home she had, where she had never been offered love or affection or understanding.

I had already begun to tell the story through the eyes of the idiot child, since I felt that it would be more effective as told by someone capable only of knowing what happened, but not why. I saw that I had not told the story that time. I tried to tell it again, the same story through the eyes of another brother. That was still not it. I told it for the third time through the eyes of the third brother. That was still not it. I tried to gather the pieces together and fill in the gaps by making myself the spokesman. It was still not complete, not until fifteen years after the book was published, when I wrote as an appendix to another book the final effort to get the story told and off my mind, so that I myself could have some peace from it. It's the book I feel tenderest towards. I couldn't leave it alone, and I never could tell it right, though I tried hard and would like to try again, though I'd probably fail again.

* * *

I don't know anything about inspiration, because I don't know what inspiration is—I've heard about it, but I never saw it.

—William Faulkner

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I think first it was that towering kind of confidence of being quite young, that one can do anything—"All's brave that youth mounts and folly guides," as we're told in *As You Like It. The Recognitions* started as a short piece of work, quite undirected, but based on the Faust story. Then as I got into the idea of forgery, the entire concept of forgery became—I wouldn't say an obsession—but a central part of everything I thought and saw; so the book expanded from simply the central character of the forger to forgery, falsification and cheapening of values and what have you, everywhere. Looking at it now with its various faults, I suppose excess would be the main charge. I remember Clive Bell looking back on his small fine book, *Art*, thirty-five years after it was published in 1913, and listing *its* faults, finding it too confident and aggressive, even too optimistic—I was never accused of that!—but still feeling, as he said, "a little envious of the adventurous young man who wrote it."

—William Gaddis

One of the most difficult things is the first paragraph. I have spent many months on a first paragraph and once I get it, the rest just comes out very easily. In the first paragraph you solve most of the problems with your book. The theme is defined, the style, the tone. At least in my case, the first paragraph is a kind of sample of what the rest of the book is going to be. That's why writing a book of short stories is much more difficult than writing a novel. Every time you write a short story, you have to begin all over again.

—Gabriel García Márquez

I thought I was going to die in the war. I was on a terrible ship. It was the Casablanca, the first baby flattop. There were always holes in it, and people dying and it was just the worst place for me to be. I really was desperate. I just wanted to jump

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off. I thought I was going to die anyway, be killed, and I wanted to die because I couldn't endure what looked like an endless way of life with which I had nothing to do—the war, the ship, and the water . . . I have been terrified of water all my life. I would have fits when I got close to it.

Suddenly—it was out on a deck in the cold—I saw the breath that came from me. And I thought that the simplest thing that I know is what I belong to and where I came from and I just called out to my family as I stood there that night, and it just . . . I saw this breath come from me and I thought—in that breath, in that call, is *their* existence, is their reality . . . and I must shape that and I must write about them—*The House of Breath.*

I saw this whole thing. I saw what was going to be four or five years' work. Isn't that amazing? But I knew it was there. Many of my stories happen that way. It's dangerous to tell my students this because then these young people say, "Gee, all I've got to do, if I really want to write, is wait around for some ship in the cold night, and I'll blow out my breath, and I've got my thing."

—William Goyen

Some people have gifts, like a friend of mine who can balance a glass on his finger and make it turn round by just looking at it. I have the gift of being occasionally able to put myself back in the past and see what's happening. That's how historical novels should be written. I also have a very good memory for anything I want to remember, and none at all for what I don't want to remember. *Wife to Mr. Milton*—my best novel—started when my wife and I were making a bed in 1943 and I suddenly said: "You know, Milton must have been a trichomaniac"—meaning a hair-fetishist. The remark suddenly sprang out of my mouth. I realized how often his imagery had been trichomanic. So I read all I could find about him, and went into the history of his marriages. I'd always hated Milton, from earliest childhood; and I wanted to find

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out the reason. I found it. His jealousy. It's present in all his poems . . . Marie Powell had long hair with which he could not compete.

—**Robert Graves**

I got the idea of *Loving* from a manservant in the Fire Service during the war. He was serving with me in the ranks, and he told me he had once asked the elderly butler who was over him what the old boy most liked in the world. The reply was: "Lying in bed on a summer morning, with the window open, listening to the church bells, eating buttered toast with cunty fingers." I saw the book in a flash.

—**Henry Green**

I was lying in bed in my four-room apartment on the West Side when suddenly this line [the first line of *Catch-22*] came to me: "It was love at first sight. The first time he saw the chaplain, Someone fell madly in love with him." I didn't have the name Yossarian. The chaplain wasn't necessarily an army chaplain—he could have been a *prison* chaplain. But as soon as the opening sentence was available, the book began to evolve clearly in my mind—even most of the particulars . . . the tone, the form, many of the characters, including some I eventually couldn't use. All of this took place within an hour and a half. It got me so excited that I did what the cliché says you're supposed to do: I jumped out of bed and paced the floor. That morning I went to my job at the advertising agency and wrote out the first chapter in long hand. Before the end of the week I had typed it out and sent it to Candida Donadio, my agent. One year later, after much planning, I began chapter two. I don't understand the process of imagination—though I know that I am very much at its mercy. I feel that these ideas are floating around in the air and they pick me to settle upon. The ideas come to me; I don't produce them at will. They come to me in the course of a sort of controlled day-

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dream, a directed reverie. It may have something to do with the disciplines of writing advertising copy (which I did for a number of years) where the limitations involved provide a considerable spur to the imagination. There's an essay of T. S. Eliot's in which he praises the disciplines of writing, claiming that if one is forced to write within a certain framework the imagination is taxed to its utmost and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom however, the chances are good that the work will sprawl.

* * *

As for *Something Happened*, in 1962 I was sitting on the deck of a house on Fire Island. I was frightened. I was worried because I had lost interest in my job then—which was writing advertising and promotion copy. *Catch-22* was not making much money. It was selling steadily (eight hundred to two thousand copies a week)—mostly by word-of-mouth—but it had never come close to the *New York Times* best-seller list. I had a wife and two children. I had no idea for another book. I was waiting for something to happen(!), wishing I had a book to start. My novels begin in a strange way. I don't begin with a theme, or even a character. I begin with a first sentence that is independent of any conscious preparation. Most often nothing comes out of it: a sentence will come to mind that doesn't lead to a second sentence. Sometimes it will lead to thirty sentences which then come to a dead end. I was alone on the deck. As I sat there worrying and wondering what to do, one of those first lines suddenly came to mind: "In the office in which I work, there are four people of whom I am afraid. Each of these four people is afraid of five people." Immediately, the lines presented a whole explosion of possibilities and choices—characters (working in a corporation), a tone, a mood of anxiety or insecurity. In that first hour (before someone came along and asked me to go to the beach) I knew the beginning, the ending, most of the middle, the whole scene of that particular "something" that was going to happen; I knew about the brain-damaged child, and especially, of course, about Bob

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Slocum, my protagonist, and what frightened him, that he wanted to be liked, that his immediate hope was to be allowed to make a three-minute speech at the company convention. Many of the actual lines throughout the book came to me—the entire "something happened" scene with those solar plexus lines (beginning with the doctor's statement and ending with "Don't tell my wife" and the rest of them) all coming to me in that first hour on that Fire Island deck. Eventually I found a different opening chapter with a different first line ("I get the willies when I see closed doors") but I kept the original, which had spurred everything, to start off the second section.

—Joseph Heller

I think the first impulse comes from some deep emotion. It may be anger, it may be some sort of excitement. I recognize in the real world around me something that triggers such an emotion, and then the emotion seems to cast up pictures in my mind that lead me towards a story. To give you an example, the impulse to write *The Wall* came from seeing some camps in Eastern Europe when I was working as a correspondent in Moscow for *Time*. We were taken first to Estonia, and there we saw a camp where the Germans had had orders to kill everybody before they left; they had done it in a crude and awful way, making the prisoners build their own pyres before shooting them. We went later to Poland, and though the Warsaw ghetto itself was completely razed, we saw a couple of camps where the same thing had happened, the Germans had been ordered to kill everybody. In each case, there had been a few survivors to talk to. This came at a time when the West had not yet known very much about the Holocaust; there had been some vague rumors of the camps, but we had no real pictures of them. To see these bodies, to hear from the people who survived, created a sense of horror and anger in me that made me want to write. I thought at first to write about one of the camps like Auschwitz, and I did a lot of research on that; then it appeared to me, later on, that the life in the ghettos

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was at least something like real life for a long time, and so would, I thought, lend itself better to a novel. But it was the sense of distress, fear, anger that I felt seeing those camps that got me launched on that work.

—John Hersey

I don't believe for a moment that creativity is a neurotic symptom. On the contrary, the neurotic who succeeds as an artist has had to overcome a tremendous handicap. He creates in spite of his neurosis, not because of it.

—Aldous Huxley

I begin by telling the truth, by remembering real people, relatives and friends. The landscape detail is pretty good, but the people aren't quite interesting enough—they don't have quite enough to do with one another; of course, what unsettles me and bores me is the absence of plot. . . . And so I find a little something that I exaggerate, a little; gradually, I have an autobiography on its way to becoming a lie. The lie, of course, is more interesting. I become much more interested in the part of the story I'm making up, in the "relative" I never had. And then I begin to think of a novel; that's the end of the diary. I promise I'll start another one as soon as I finish the novel. Then the same thing happens; the lies become much more interesting—always.

—John Irving

Burroughs and I were sitting in a bar one night and we heard a newscaster saying . . . "and so the Egyptians attacked blah blah . . . and meanwhile there was a great fire in the zoo in London and the fire raced across the fields and the hippos were boiled in their tanks! Goodnight everyone!" That's Bill, he noticed that. Because he notices them kind of things.

—Jack Kerouac

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What triggered "King of the River," I recall, was a brief report in *Time* of some new research on the aging process of the Pacific salmon. I wrote the poem in Provincetown one fall—my favorite writing season. The very first lines came to me with their conditional syntax and suspended clauses, a winding and falling movement. The rest seemed to flow, maybe because I'm never very far from the creature world. Some of my deepest feelings have to do with plants and animals. In my bad times they've sustained me. It may be pertinent that I experienced a curious elation while confronting the unpleasant reality of being mortal, the inexorable process of my own decay. Perhaps I had managed to "distance" my fate—the salmon was doing my dying for me.

A poem has secrets that the poet knows nothing of. It takes on a life and a will of its own. It might have proceeded differently—towards catastrophe, resignation, terror, despair—and I still would have to claim it. Valéry said that poetry is a language within a language. It is also a language beyond language, a meta-medium—that is, metabolic, metaphoric, metamorphic. A poet's collected work is his book of changes. The great meditations on death have a curious exaltation. I suppose it comes from the realization, even on the threshold, that one isn't done with one's changes.

* * *

The poem in the head is always perfect. Resistance starts when you try to convert it into language. Language itself is a kind of resistance to the pure flow of self. The solution is to become one's language. You cannot write a poem until you hit upon its rhythm. That rhythm not only belongs to the subject matter, it belongs to your interior world, and the moment they hook up there's a quantum leap of energy. You can ride on that rhythm, it will carry you somewhere strange. The next morning you look at the page and wonder how it all happened. You have to triumph over all your diurnal glibness and cheapness and defensiveness.

—Stanley Kunitz

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Some bit of scenery or something you've felt. Almost the whole problem of writing poetry is to bring it back to what you really feel, and that takes an awful lot of maneuvering. You may feel the doorknob more strongly than some big personal event, and the doorknob will open into something that you can use as your own. A lot of poetry seems to me very good in the tradition but just doesn't move me very much because it doesn't have personal vibrance to it. I probably exaggerate the value of it, but it's precious to me. Some little image, some detail you've noticed—you're writing about a little country shop, just describing it, and your poem ends up with an existentialist account of your experience. But it's the shop that started it off. You didn't know why it meant a lot to you. Often images and often the sense of the beginning and end of a poem are all you have—some journey to be gone through between those things: you know that, but you don't know the details. And that's marvelous; then you feel the poem will come out. It's a terrible struggle, because what you really feel hasn't got the form, it's not what you can put down in a poem. And the poem you're equipped to write concerns nothing that you care very much about or have much to say on. Then the great moment comes when there's enough resolution of your technical equipment, your way of constructing things, and what you can make a poem out of, to hit something you really want to say. You may not know you have it to say.

—Robert Lowell

An appropriate image for me might be that I start with the idea of constructing a treehouse and end with a skyscraper made of wood. With *The Naked and the Dead*, I wanted to write a short novel about a long patrol. All during the war I kept thinking about this patrol. I even had the idea before I went overseas. Probably it was stimulated by a few war books I had read: John Hersey's *Into the Valley*, Harry Brown's *A Walk in the Sun*, and a couple of others I no longer remember. Out of these books came the idea to do a novel about a long patrol. And I began to create my characters. All the while I

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was overseas a part of me was working on this long patrol. I even ended up in a reconnaissance outfit which I had asked to get into. A reconnaissance outfit, after all, tends to take long patrols. Art kept traducing life. At any rate, when I started writing *The Naked and the Dead* I thought it might be a good idea to have a preliminary chapter or two in which to give the reader a chance to meet my characters before they went on patrol. But the next six months and the first five hundred pages went into that, and I remember in the early days I was annoyed at how long it was taking me to get to the patrol.

—Norman Mailer

When I was at Harvard I got to know Robert Fitzgerald, and I used to show my poems to him. In spite of the fact that I was older than he was—I was a graduate student and he was a sophomore—I had enormous respect for him. He was better educated than I was, and intransigent, and he despised anything that wasn't first rate. One day he looked at my poem and then he looked at me, rather in the way you look at children who present a problem, and he said, "Why don't you write prose?" I was so happy that he thought I could write *anything* that I just turned to and wrote prose—as if he'd given me permission to try. The prose took the form of fiction because I do like stories and don't have a very firm grasp on ideas.

—William Maxwell

When I start something it's like being a bird dog getting a smell; it's a matter of running it down in prose and then trying to figure out what the thing is that's out there. Sometimes it might be a picture. This morning when I was writing I was chasing down one of those images. It was just a minute thing that happened to me while I was recently down in Alabama. We had rented a little cottage on the edge of Mobile Bay and at one point there was stormy weather out on the bay; I wandered out to see what kind of weather it was and the door blew

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closed and locked me out of the cottage. I thought about getting back inside and I sat down and there was one of those semi-tropical warm summer rains starting to come down like buckshot. Somehow the image of stepping outside to see what's going on and having the wind blow the door shut has stuck in my head. I don't know what that image *is* exactly, or what it means, but I know that ever since I came home I've been trying to pursue that image in language, find out what it is. That image begins to ionize the prose and narrative particles around it so that words are drawn in, people and language begin to appear. That's when things are going well. When that's happening, any reader will recognize that flame-edge of discovery, that excitement of proceeding on the page that is shared between the reader, the writer, and the page.

—Thomas McGuane

When I start I have a pretty well-developed idea what the book is about and how it ought to go, because generally I've been thinking about it and making notes for months if not years. Generally I have the ending in mind, usually the last paragraph almost verbatim. I begin at the beginning and stay close to the track, if it is a track and not a whalepath. If it turns out I'm in the open sea, my compass is my narrative instinct, with assistance from that astrolabe, theme. The destination, wherever it is, is, as I said, already defined. If I go astray it's not a long excursis, good for getting to know the ocean if not the world. The original idea, altered but recognizable, on the whole remains.

—Bernard Malamud

Whether you're at your desk or not when a poem's under way, isn't there that constant eddy in your mind? If it's strong enough all sorts of random flotsam gets drawn into it, how selectively it's hopeless to decide at the time. I try to break off, get away from the page, into the kitchen for a spell of mixing

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and marinating which gives the words a chance to sort themselves out behind my back. But there's really no escape, except perhaps the third drink. On "ordinary" days, days when you've nothing on the burner, it might be safe to say that you're not a poet at all: more like a doctor at a dinner party, just another guest until his hostess slumps to the floor or his little beeper goes off. Most of those signals are false alarms—only they're not. Language *is* your medium. You can be talking or writing a letter, and out comes an observation, a "sentence-sound" you rather like. It needn't be your own. And it's not going to make a poem, or even fit into one. But the *twinge* it gives you—and it's this, I daresay, that distinguishes you from the "citizen"—reminds you you've got to be careful, that you've a condition that needs watching. . .

—James Merrill

Each man has his own way. After all, most writing is done away from the typewriter, away from the desk. I'd say it occurs in the quiet, silent moments, while you're walking or shaving or playing a game or whatever, or even talking to someone you're not vitally interested in. You're working, your mind is working, on this problem in the back of your head. So, when you get to the machine it's a mere matter of transfer.

What is an artist? He's a man who has antennae, who knows how to hook up to the currents which are in the atmosphere, in the cosmos; he merely has the facility for hooking on, as it were. Who is original? Everything that we are doing, everything that we think, exists already, and we are only intermediaries, that's all, who make use of what is in the air. Why do ideas, why do great scientific discoveries often occur in different parts of the world at the same time? The same is true of the elements that go to make up a poem or a great novel or any work of art. They are already in the air, they have not been given voice, that's all. They need *the* man, *the* interpreter, to bring them forth.

—Henry Miller

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A felicitous phrase springs to mind—or a word or two, say—simultaneous usually with some thought or object of equal attraction: "Its leaps should be *set*/ to the flageo*let*": "Katydid-wing subdivided by *sun*/ till the nettings are *legion*."

—Marianne Moore

I can't remember exactly how a given play developed in my mind. I think what happens is that I write in a very high state of excitement and frustration. I follow what I see on the paper in front of me—one sentence after another. That doesn't mean I don't have a dim, possible overall idea—the image that starts off doesn't just engender what happens immediately, it engenders the possibility of an overall happening, which carries me through. I've got an idea of what *might* happen—sometimes I'm absolutely right, but on many occasions I've been proved wrong by what does actually happen. Sometimes I'm going along and I find myself writing "C. comes in" when I didn't know that he was going to come in; he *had* to come in at that point, that's all.

—Harold Pinter

The truth is, I have never written a story in my life that didn't have a very firm foundation in actual human experience—somebody else's experience quite often, but an experience that became my own by hearing the story, by witnessing the thing, by hearing just a word perhaps. It doesn't matter, it just takes a little—a tiny seed. Then it takes root, and it grows. It's an organic thing. That story ["Flowering Judas"] had been on my mind for years, growing out of this one little thing that happened in Mexico. It was forming and forming in my mind, until one night I was quite desperate—people are always so sociable, and I'm sociable too, and if I live around friends . . . Well, they were insisting that I come and play bridge. But I was very firm, because I knew the time had come to write that story, and I had to write it.

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Something I saw as I passed a window one evening. A girl I knew had asked me to come and sit with her, because a man was coming to see her, and she was a little afraid of him. And as I went through the courtyard, past the flowering judas tree, I glanced in the window and there she was sitting with an open book on her lap, and there was this great big fat man sitting beside her. Now Mary and I were friends, both American girls living in this revolutionary situation. She was teaching at an Indian school, and I was teaching dancing at a girls' technical school in Mexico City. And we were having a very strange time of it. I was more skeptical, and so I had already begun to look with a skeptical eye on a great many of the revolutionary leaders—oh, the idea was all right, but a lot of men were misapplying it.

And when I looked through that window that evening, I saw something in Mary's face, something in her pose, something in the whole situation, that set up a commotion in my mind. Because until that moment I hadn't really understood that she was not able to take care of herself, because she was not able to face her own nature and was afraid of everything.

I don't know why I saw it. I don't believe in intuition. When you get sudden flashes of perception, it is just the brain working faster than usual. But you've been getting ready to know it for a long time, and when it comes, you feel you've known it always.

—Katherine Anne Porter

It is hard to describe. I have an idea of the beginning. I write the first line and continue to the last. I correct a great deal, work hard and write several drafts, but I never question the finished work. So I start with the first words which will be the first words of the book, but I never know how it will develop or end. The first idea is vague, but I know that it is the generating force—later everything can change. I can well imagine Proust writing: "For a long time I used to go to bed early . . ." and not knowing what story he was going to tell.

—Alain Robbe-Grillet

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Beginning a book is unpleasant. I'm entirely uncertain about the character and the predicament, and a character in his predicament is what I have to begin with. Worse than not knowing your subject is not knowing how to treat it, because that's finally everything. I type out beginnings and they're awful, more of an unconscious parody of my previous book than the breakaway from it that I want. I need something driving down the center of a book, a magnet to draw everything to it—that's what I look for during the first months of writing something new. I often have to write a hundred pages or more before there's a paragraph that's alive. Okay, I say to myself, that's your beginning, start there; that's the first paragraph of the book. I'll go over the first six months of work and underline in red a paragraph, a sentence, sometimes no more than a phrase, that has some life in it, and then I'll type all these out on one page. Usually it doesn't come to more than one page, but if I'm lucky, that's the start of page one. I look for the liveliness to set the tone. After the awful beginning come the months of freewheeling play, and after the play come the crises, turning against your material and hating the book.

—Philip Roth

Many of my poems are love poems. I'm only able to write poetry, for the most part, when I have a Muse, a woman who focuses the world for me. She may be a lover, may not. In one case it was a person I saw only once, at lunch in a room with a lot of other people, and I wrote a whole book of poems. Many of these poems have not been published. But this is the mystery. Something happens which touches the source of poetry and ignites it. Sometimes it is the result of a long love affair, as with "The Divorce of Lovers" poems, the sonnet sequence. But not always. So who is the audience for my poetry? The audience is the loved one for me. But usually "the loved one" isn't really interested in the poems.

—May Sarton

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Watching, listening, remembering. A lot of them from my friends or people I meet. Sometimes from a general feeling or belief which is strong enough to make me invent characters and situations to state it. For example, my story *The Eighty-Yard Run*, which was about an ex-football player, a minor hero, who turns into a complete failure by the age of thirty-five, came as a result of my seeing around me so many men, all of whose best moments had come in their youth. I wanted to express that and show the subtle disappointments and inadequacies which bring so many promising young men to failure so early. Americans are at their best in their youth, and for me, at least, nothing is more characteristic of that best side and best moment of Americans than the race down the football field under a kickoff, in which are mingled gaiety, grace, recklessness, good-humored ferocity, skill at high speed, all taking place in a particular atmosphere of health and holiday that is duplicated nowhere else in the world. It was a productive symbol both for me and for the reader, and I built my story around the feelings of past joy and present regret that remembering it gave me.

—Irwin Shaw

There are two theories of inspiration. One idea is that poetry can actually be dictated to you, like it was to William Blake. You are in a hallucinated state, and you hear a voice or you are in communication with something outside, like James Merrill's new poem, which he says is dictated through the Ouija board by Auden and other people.

The other idea is Paul Valèry's, what he calls *une ligne donnée*, that you are given one line and you try to follow up this clue, pulling the whole poem out of it. My own experience is that a rhythm or something comes into my head which I feel I must do, I must write it, create it.

For example, I recall looking out of a railway window and seeing an industrial landscape, factories, slag heaps, and the line coming into my head: "A language of flesh and roses." The

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thought at the back of this was that the industrial landscape was a language, what people have made out of nature, the contrast of nature and the industrial, "A language of flesh and roses." The problem of the poem was to work this connection out, trying to go back to remember what you really thought at that instant, and trying to recreate it. If I think of a poem, I may spend six months writing, but what I am really trying to do is remember what I thought of at that instant.

—**Stephen Spender**

Something I read or see stays in my head for five or six years. I always remember the date, the place, the room, the road, when I first was struck. For instance, *World Enough and Time*. Katherine Anne Porter and I were both at the Library of Congress as Fellows. We were in the same pew, had offices next to each other. She came in one day with an old pamphlet, the trial of Beauchamp for killing Colonel Sharp. She said, "Well, Red, you better read this." There it was. I read it in five minutes. But I was six years making the book. Any book I write starts with a flash but takes a long time to shape up. All of your first versions are in your head so by the time you sit down to write you have some line developed in your head.

—**Robert Penn Warren**

The process by which the idea for a play comes to me has always been something I really couldn't pinpoint. A play just seems to materialize, like an apparition it gets clearer and clearer and clearer. It's very vague at first, as in the case of *Streetcar*, which came after *Menagerie*. I simply had the vision of a woman in her late youth. She was sitting in a chair all alone by a window with the moonlight streaming in on her desolate face, and she'd been stood up by the man she planned to marry.

I believe I was thinking of my sister because she was madly in love with some young man at the International Shoe Com-

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pany who paid her court. He was extremely handsome, and she was profoundly in love with him. Whenever the phone would ring, she'd nearly faint. She'd think it was he calling for a date, you know? They saw each other every other night, and then one time he just didn't call anymore. That was when Rose first began to go into a mental decline. From that vision *Streetcar* evolved. I called it, at the time, *Blanche's Chair in the Moon*, which is a very bad title. But it was from that image, you know, of a woman sitting by a window that *Streetcar* came to me.

—**Tennessee Williams**

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Rick Bass is the author of *The Watch*, a collection of stories to be published by Norton in January, 1989, and *Oil Notes*, a collection of essays to be published by Seymour Lawrence. His stories have appeared in *The Paris Review, Antaeus, Esquire*, and many other magazines. He lives in Montana.

Robert Cohen's first novel, *The Organ Builder*, was published in July by Harper & Row. His stories have appeared in *Ploughshares, The Iowa Review, The Massachusetts Review*, and other magazines, as well as in *The Pushcart Prize XII* and *Editors' Choice, Vol. IV.*

John Hersey is the author of more than twenty books, including *A Bell for Adano* (which won the Pulitzer Prize), *Hiroshima, The Wall, The Algiers Motel Incident, Letter to the Alumni, The Call*, and, most recently, *Blues.* His short fiction has appeared recently in *Esquire, The Atlantic, Grand Street*, and elsewhere.

Bobbie Ann Mason is the author of *In Country* and *Shiloh and Other Stories.* Her most recent novel, *Spence + Lila*, was published in June 1988 by Harper & Row. "Sorghum" will be included in her collection, *Love Life*, to be published in March, 1989. Mason is a native of Kentucky.

POETRY

Agha Shahid Ali is the author of *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (Wesleyan), and is finishing a second collection as well as a book of translations of the Urdu poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz. His other publications include a scholarly work,

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T. S. Eliot As Editor (UMI Research Press), and three chapbooks, most recently *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (SUN/Gemini Press). He teaches English at Hamilton College.

Nathalie Anderson teaches at Swarthmore College. She is the author of *My Hand My Only Map* (House of Keys Press, 1978), and two collections in manuscript, *Phobophobia* and *Looker.*

John Ash has published three volumes of poetry, *The Goodbyes* (Carcanet, 1982), *The Branching Stairs* (Carcanet, 1985), and *Disbelief* (Carcanet, 1987). He was born in England, and currently resides in New York. He received an Ingram Merrill Fellowship in 1985.

Robert Bensen's latest book of poems is *Scriptures of Venus* (Swamp Press, 1988). He teaches writing and literature at Hartwick College. His work has appeared recently in *Antioch Review*, *Partisan Review*, *The Agni Review*, and *River Styx.*

S. Ben-Tov's first book of poems, *During Ceasefire*, was published by Harper & Row in 1985. Her work has received various awards, including *The Paris Review's* Bernard F. Conners Prize and First Prize in the National Poetry Competition. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is working on her second book of poems, *Herzl's Apple.*

Mary Campbell's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Atlantic*, *The Little Magazine*, *The Agni Review*, *Nantucket Review*, and *Partisan Review. The Witness and the Other World*, a book about exotic travel literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, will be published this fall. She will join the English Department at Brandeis in the fall.

Michael Covino is the author of a collection of short stories, *The Off-Season*, and a collection of poems, *Unfree Associations.* As a contributing editor to *California* magazine, he has written about Oakland's drug wars, spelunking in Shasta Caverns, and ranging through the Klamaths in search of Bigfoot. He is completing his first novel.

Jonathan Galassi's translations have appeared in *Otherwise: Last and First Poems of Eugenio Montale* (Random House). He also edited and translated Montale's selected essays, *The Second Life of Art* (Ecco Press), published in 1982. He served as poetry editor for *The Paris Review* from 1978 until this spring. His book of poetry, *Morning Run*, will appear from Paris Review Editions in the fall.

Marilyn Hacker's most recent books are *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* (Arbor House, 1986) and *Assumptions* (Knopf, 1985).

Miguel Hernandez was born in 1910 in Orihuela, Spain. He was captured after the Spanish Civil War and held in Franco's prisons until he died there in 1942, of tuberculosis. His work was widely published during his lifetime, and he was highly acclaimed by Neruda, Lorca, and other great Spanish writers. **Don Share** is now working on a book of translations of Hernandez's poetry.

Brenda Hillman's second book, *Fortress*, is forthcoming from Wesleyan University Press. She teaches at St. Mary's College in California.

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Andrew Hudgins has been an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Cincinnati since 1985. He has published two books of poetry, *After the Lost War: A Narrative* (Houghton Mifflin, January 1988) and *Saints and Strangers*, which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1986. His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Kenyon Review*. He was a recipient of the Academy of American Poets Award and an Ingram Merrill Foundation Grant in 1987.

Karl Kirchwey's poetry has appeared in *Boulevard*, *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, and *Prairie Schooner*. His work is forthcoming in *Grand Street*, *The Yale Review*, and elsewhere. He is the director of the Poetry Center at the 92nd Street YMCA.

David Mamet is the author of *Speed-the-Plow*, *American Buffalo*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and other plays.

Tom Sleigh is a recent winner of both Guggenheim and NEA Fellowships. His poems have appeared in *Antaeus*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere. His first book of poems, *After One*, was published by Houghton Mifflin, and he has recently completed a second. He is currently an advisory editor of *The Agni Review*. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Charlie Smith is the author of the novel *Canaan* (Simon & Schuster, 1984) and the poetry collection *Red Roads* (1987), which was a selection in the National Poetry Series. He has poems forthcoming in *The American Poetry Review* and *Crazyhorse*, as well as recent work in *The New Yorker* and *The Nation*. His second novel, *Shine Hawk*, will be published this fall by Paris Review Editions.

Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian playwright, novelist and poet, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1987. "Your Logic Frightens Me Mandela" is from a collection which Random House will publish in fall 1988.

Bruce Weigl is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *Song of Napalm* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1988). *The Monkey Wars*, his second full-length collection, was nominated for the Lamont Poetry Prize and the William Carlos Williams Prize. His work has appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Mother Jones*, *The Ohio Review*, *The Nation*, *TriQuarterly* and elsewhere. He has been awarded a Pushcart Prize, The Academy of American Poets Prize, and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. He currently teaches in the Writing Program at Penn State University.

INTERVIEWS

Jim Fergus is a freelance writer living in Rand, Colorado. His work has appeared in *Newsweek*, *Newsday*, *Outside*, *The Texas Monthly*, *Savvy*, *Fly Fisherman*, *The Denver Post*, *The Dallas Times Herald*, and a number of other magazines and newspapers. He recently completed his first novel.

Mona Simpson is the author of *Anywhere But Here* and is an advisory editor of *The Paris Review*.

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ART

Michael Byron was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1954 and lives in New York. Recent exhibitions of his work have been held at Galerie Barbara Farber, Amsterdam; Luhring, Augustine and Hodes Gallery, New York; and Edition Julie Sylvester, New York.
Andrew Spence was born in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, in 1947, and lives in New York. His paintings and drawings have been exhibited at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and Barbara Toll Gallery, New York.
David Storey was born in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1948 and lives in New York. Exhibitions of his work have been held at Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York, and Hirschl and Adler Modern, New York.

FEATURE

Interviewers include Zoltan Abadi-Nagy (William Gaddis), Franklin Ashley (James Dickey), Lawrence Bensky (Harold Pinter), Ted Berrigan (Jack Kerouac), Peter Buckman and William Fifield (Robert Graves), Elizabeth Pell Broadwell and Ronald Wesley Hoag (Erskine Caldwell), John Burrows and Alex Hamilton (Joyce Cary), Chris Busa (Stanley Kunitz), Jonathan Dee (John Hersey), Ralph Ellison and Eugene Walter (Robert Penn Warren), Ray Frazer (Aldous Huxley), Annette Grant (John Cheever), Sinda Gregory and Larry MaCaffery (Thomas McGuane), Shusha Guppy (Alain Robbe-Grillet), Donald Hall (Marianne Moore), Ron Hansen (John Irving), Gordon Lloyd Harper (Saul Bellow), Pati Hill (Truman Capote), Linda Kuehl (Joan Didion), Hermione Lee (Philip Roth), Alfred MacAdam (Guillermo Cabrera Infante), Steven Marcus (Norman Mailer), J. D. McClatchy (James Merrill), Jeanne McCulloch (Leon Edel), Molly McKaughan and Fayette Hickox (J. P. Donleavy), Julian Mitchell and Gene Andrewski (Lawrence Durrell), Willie Morris, John Marquand, and Lucas Matthiessen (Irwin Shaw), Robert Phillips (William Goyen), George Plimpton (John Barth, E. L. Doctorow, Joseph Heller, William Maxwell, Irwin Shaw), Dotson Rader (Tennessee Williams), Karen Saum (May Sarton), John Seabrook (William Maxwell), Frederick Seidel (Robert Lowell), Terry Southern (Henry Green), Jean Stein (William Faulkner), Daniel Stern (Bernard Malamud), Peter Stitt (John Ashbery, John Berryman, Stephen Spender), Peter H. Stone (Gabriel Garcia Marquez), Barbara Thompson (Katherine Anne Porter), George Wickes (Aldous Huxley, Henry Miller).

David Foster Wallace's story "Little Expressionless Animals," published in issue 106, has been awarded The John Train Humor Prize for 1987.

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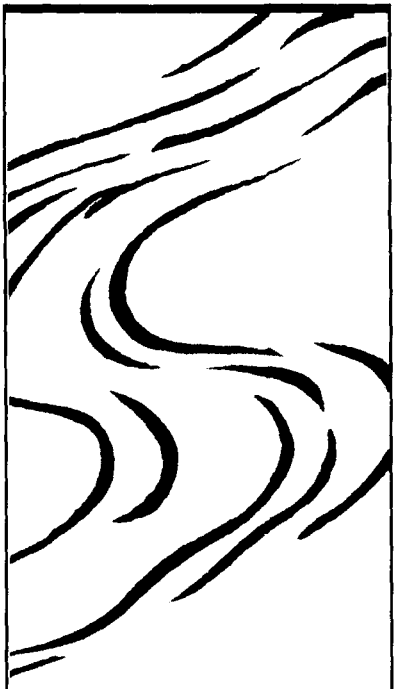

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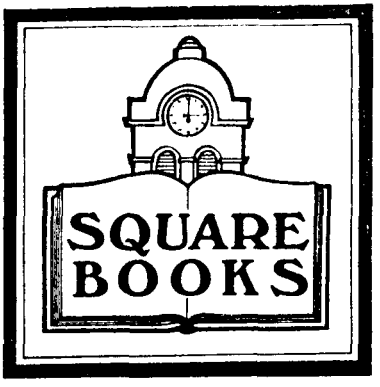

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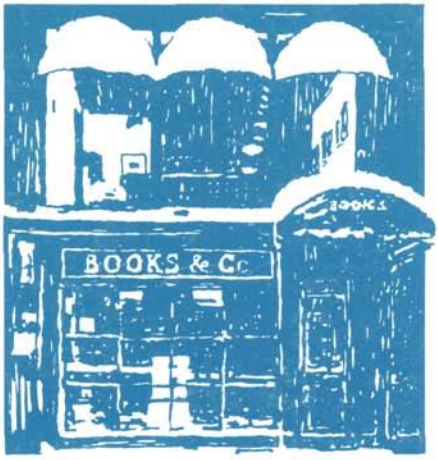

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